

- **Stories enhance or change perceptions.** It is a way of making a strange new idea familiar and comprehensible and acceptable to a potentially resistant audience.
- **They are easy to remember.** The teller provides the listeners with a casual sequence within which they can make sense of a wide range of phenomena and events by drawing on their experience and tacit understanding.
- **Stories are inherently non-adversarial.** The words, "let me tell you a story," elicit our collaboration in ways that go back into our past. The natural approach is to go along with the storyteller and see where the story leads.
- **Stories are inherently non-hierarchical.** But a factual presentation tends to imply a hierarchical system where some are qualified to judge and others are expected to follow. All have the ability to make rational judgments about a story – does it logically stick together and does it ring true?

(More info from Storytelling Foundation International, 116 W. Main St., Jonesborough, TN 37659; 800/952-8392; www.storytellingfoundation.net)

INTERNET ETHICS CODE ENDORSED TO SAFEGUARD CREDIBILITY

Eleven pr organizations have agreed on principles that their members will be asked to follow in conducting business on the Internet. Purpose is to "insure that the information posted on the Internet is accurate and truthful and the sources for that information are always identified," explains James Murphy, president of the Arthur W. Page Society, the organization that coordinated the development of the principles. The alternative is that practitioners risk losing credibility for themselves and their clients.

Ethics principles include: 1) present fact-based content; 2) be an objective advocate, providing timely and credible info and offering direct interaction with all expert sources; 3) earn the public's trust by disclosing participation in online chat rooms and conferences, correcting info that is online, providing counsel on privacy, security and other online trust issues; 4) educate the pr profession on best practices in the use of the Internet and digital media. There is no formal monitoring mechanism but coalition is encouraging members to voluntarily adopt the ethics code they have approved. (More info from www.awpagesociety.com). Coalition members include:

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| Arthur W. Page Society | Conf Board's Council on | PA Council |
| Corp Com'ns Institute | Corp Com'ns Strategy | PRSA |
| Council of Com'n Mgmt | Institute for PR | PRSA Foundation |
| Council of PR Firms | IABC | Women Execs in PR |

ITEM OF INTEREST TO PROFESSIONALS

¶ **Health Information Called Incomplete, Confusing** by 3 out of 4, in a survey of 1,014 men and women by the Council of PR Firms. Respondents also believe that drug and alcohol abuse (27%) is our most urgent health issue, more serious than cancer (19%), diet, nutrition and exercise (18%), sexually transmitted diseases (11%), heart disease (11%), mental health and depression (10%). (More from www.prfirms.org or call 877/773-4767)

STRATEGIC PLANNING AND COMMUNICATION – TWO ESSENTIALS FOR SUCCESSFUL MERGERS AND ACQUISITIONS, STUDIES FIND

But the obvious is still too often overlooked during the stress and demands of merging and a myopic bottomline focus from decisionmakers. Two recent studies, one by Ontario-based de Jager and Company, Ltd., the other commissioned by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), find that the success of a merger and/or acquisition (M&A) requires a healthy organizational culture – and **communication is the most important component of the change process.**

Yet, according to the de Jager study, which surveyed 250 corporations, **most managers neglect communication.** "The findings tell us what we already know but keep ignoring," consultant Peter de Jager told prr. "We know what we should do, but we continue to make the same mistakes."

WEDDING OF 2 DIFFERENT CULTURES VOTED "LEAST LIKELY TO SUCCEED"

The research defines corporate culture as the moral, social and behavioral norms of an organization based on the beliefs, attitudes and priorities of its member. Interestingly, the study reveals that **mergers between companies with extremely different corporate cultures are seven times more likely not to succeed** than mergers with corporate cultures described as "reasonably the same."

"Every organization has its own unique culture. It's typically created unconsciously but it permeates through the whole company and is very difficult to change," says de Jager. "When companies with extremely different corporate cultures merge, it places a tremendous strain on the management and staff of both companies and significantly impacts the chances of a successful merger."

Forming a single corporation – and culture – requires time and consistent management strategy. Foremost that includes concise, frequent communication between management and employees. "It takes time for people to get used to the idea of change – before the change actually begins to occur. If management takes the opportunity to frequently communicate the benefits and issues related to the merger, then employees are more likely to respond positively. If not, then employees resist the change, affecting the merger's success."

Survey Highlights:

1. **Give employees time.** Those M&As that take 12 to 18 months from the first announcement to the start of the process are 150% more likely to succeed than companies that initiate a merger within six months of the first rumor or announcement.

Management's biggest and most oft-repeated mistake is pushing aside the people aspect of a merger, acquisition or change, notes de Jager. "I ask the question, 'what is the most important component (of a merger)?' The answer I often get is, 'communication, communication, communication.' They string these words together – I'm struck by the repetition, the pleading, the frustration."



- 2. **Listen to their assessment.** Management is 300% more likely to judge the merger or acquisition a success than are the rest of employees.
- 3. **Personal touch is key.** When managers personally inform staff of a pending merger or acquisition, they are two to three times more likely to experience a successful merger than companies that allow the media or rumor mill to break the news to employees.
- 4. **Many employees still find out the hard way.** Indeed, 30% indicate they first learned of a merger or acquisition through the media or rumor mill.

“Find out what people are worried about,” stresses de Jager. “A lot of times, it’s something as simple as being afraid of losing their jobs. Unless you address those changes, you’re setting yourself up for problems.” He takes issue with a recent trend of thought, which encourages management to move forward and let employees sink or swim. This new thinking, he says, is outlined in the current best seller, *Who Moved My Cheese?*, a management book by Spencer Johnson. The book is a parable about two mice and two tiny humans living in a maze. When the cheese is moved, mayhem results and the mice and tiny humans have to decide whether to adapt to their new conditions and find new cheese or go hungry. The point seems to be that we have to be alert to changes, welcome it, and be prepared to go running off in search of new cheese. de Jager doesn’t buy into that. “The subtitle to the book should be, ‘And where is he and why isn’t he talking to us?’” he says.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF COMMUNICATION SHOULD BE IN THE MIX

is critical to the success of M&As, as is bringing acquired employees into new corporate cultures. “However,” notes study author Patricia Whalen, “communication is not a magic pill that can make a poorly crafted merger succeed.” Also, while meetings, intranet sites, written updates and other formal vehicles are important and give employees a sense of context, informal chats and relationship building are just as critical. “The management must be visible during the change and demonstrate leadership in communication.”

“This research serves as a warning to those executives who pride themselves in making a quick deal, yet do not spend enough time up front on due diligence, strategically planning the implementation process, or assessing the true synergies of the merged entity,” says IABC Research Foundation chair Tamara Gillis. “These executives may wrongly believe that they can make any merger succeed with enough time and well-thought-out communication efforts.” (More information on the de Jager study from Peter de Jager at de Jager & Company Ltd., 905-792-8706 or visit www.technobility.com. For more information on the IABC study, call 415-544-4700.)

The IABC study, sponsored by Johnston Smith International, also asserts that strategic communication

Even the best strategic communication plan won’t make a dumb idea work. “There is much evidence that many M&As fail despite the best communication efforts, because they were strategically an unsound venture or the level of projected synergy was over-estimated,” notes Whalen.

STORYTELLING ENHANCES LEADERSHIP, SUPPORTS ORG’L CHANGE

It’s a powerful communication tool that *shows* rather than *tells*. Storytelling Foundation International illustrates with this success story:

When the World Bank (WB) realized that sharing information was as important as lending money, employees were reluctant to embrace this idea. To convince them, Stephen Denning, director of WB’s knowledge management program, tried charts and graphs, rational reports but to no avail. Then he told a simple story about how a health worker in a remote region of Zambia logged on to the website of the Center for Disease Control and obtained a treatment protocol for malaria. The 29-word story made employees sit up and take notice. Now knowledge management made sense to them. They could quickly understand how much the CDC valued accessibility to knowledge and what that meant to a people on the other side of the world. They were then ready to see the charts and graphs.

“A good story efficiently and powerfully conveys knowledge that often cannot be communicated as effectively in other ways...dramatically enacting a truth that can move us and influence the way we see things,” says Denning.

STORYTELLING CAN SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Storytelling is not a panacea for organizational change, notes Denning in his paper “Using Stories to Spark Organizational Change.” Nor is it a

substitute for changes in strategy, programs, budgets, incentives, personnel, measurement and all the many actions needed to transform a large organization. It is, however, “a tool that can be used to elicit decisions to implement such measures in the first place. **It can help the instigator of change communicate the change idea at any level.** It can assist in mobilizing large numbers of employees, including entrenched managers, to support changes that will initially seem strange and threatening.” Denning gives the following reasons for the success of storytelling:

- **It’s natural and easy.** For most people, listening to stories is invigorating and pleasurable. The teller builds off the listeners’ reactions; they sense the storyteller is interacting with them and respond with more reactions. This is natural, spontaneous and pleasurable.
- **It shows the connections between things.** A good story holds disparate elements together long enough to energize and guide action, plausibly enough to allow people to make retrospective sense of whatever happens, and engagingly enough that others will contribute their own inputs in the interest of sense-making.
- **Stories help cope with complexity.** Since the beginning of time they’ve been used to provide a simple way to explain the world’s complexity.
- **Stories bypass defense mechanisms.** The mind does not critique or analyze a story (as it does a presentation of facts) but follows it and projects on to it. This enables a more participatory spirit toward understanding what is involved in it. The listener lives the story.
- **Stories are energizing.** When the listener discovers the implicit idea in a story, energy is generated. All the listener has to do is join the dots. Suddenly a whole new set of relationships exists in the mind. Connections are established. As in nuclear fusion, new energy is generated.

Stories engage our feelings. Stories are in their nature about the irregularities in our lives, things that catch our attention as being different from what is expected, thus arouse our curiosity or fear. These irregularities operate as a potential threat to our capacity to stay in control of our lives. Stories 1) help us understand them so as to be able to have a say in our future and 2) engage our emotions when we see our well-being and safety to be at risk.