



Voices Convert staff into your merger militia

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When CPA firm leaders are in discussions to merge with another firm, the conversation at some point turns to the importance of staff retention and engagement over the short and long term.

For a successful merger, it's incredibly important to make sure team members understand the changes and what's in it for them, and equally important that firm leaders choose and empower key team members to help the firm manage through the changes. These soldiers will be a front line to help the firm identify weaknesses and opportunities, bridge the two cultures, and become the flag-bearers and endorsers of the change.

Here are five key ways to turn your staff into the engaged merger militia that will lead to success:

1. Early engagement: Key team members should have input into the criteria used to pick potential firms with which to merge. This not only provides a reality check to make sure the other firm's services, geography, client base and business models are complementary, but will also help with integration efforts down the road.

For instance, firm leaders may think they really need more leadership or expertise in a particular practice; however, checking in with the staff CPAs may yield a bigger need for another type of expertise. In another scenario, staff members might reveal that adding an office location is an unwanted complication that may impact staff engagement and retention.

If possible, start to engage folks a year ahead. Select key team members by seniority, level of responsibility, or other criteria that make sense to the firm.

2. Due diligence: As things start to progress with the merger discussions, ask your merger militia staff members to work on due diligence, looking at the client files and other records of the firm you're joining. Have them use agreed-upon checklists. They should make sure they understand what kind of work is being done, how the work is being done, and how much of the work is being done. At the end of this process, those clients will become your clients and team members will all be working on the same team. Due diligence can help you get a deeper understanding and help spot red flags.

3. Reward: If there's an economic incentive to this merger, staff members will be more inclined to make the deal work. If you expect them to take on more clients, retain clients or grow the business by a certain percentage or number, tell them they will get a bonus or other type of reward.



4. Integration ambassadors: The bridging of two staffs and two cultures is a tricky business. Many times it boils down to personnel, personalities and disruption of comfort zones. By getting key team members on board early, and relying on them throughout the process, you will be setting them up as internal change agents, ready to help with integration efforts when the time comes. Get team members from both firms to examine best practices, selecting the best approaches from each firm to move forward as one. They can help other team members through the transition and avoid some of the cynicism or fear that can result from a change such as this. Managing through the change peer-to-peer helps avoid some of the negativity that comes with a top-down, “because the bosses said so” mentality.

5. Cross-channel delegation: It’s important to empower staff to lead the way in this merger, while partners mentor the change. Owners may have a natural tendency to take control, which can poison integration efforts. Encouraging the delegation of responsibilities across the firm and across the firm’s channels, on the other hand, promotes coordination, which will ultimately be more productive and successful. Similarly, firm leaders can’t just rely on their pre-merger go-to staff members for everything. Responsibilities need to be shared and explored so everyone in the newly merged firm gets a shot to shine and grow.

The strategy for a merger must be heavily driven by the owners much like generals do in any militia. Future leaders evolve by exposure to the strategic process and empowerment to implement and manipulate the plan. The time for the evolution of your staff is now and the merger process is a critical part of their progress and yours. Make them a strong part of it.

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