Machinery of government
The people dimension of amalgamations
Three part series
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Part one: Leadership and communication

Strength of leadership and communication is key to unlocking the value of the Western Australia agency amalgamations

Western Australian Premier, the Hon Mark McGowan MLA recently announced the amalgamation of State Government agencies, reducing the number of departments from 41 to 25. The objectives of these amalgamations include improving collaboration, integrating services and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery.

How leaders of the newly formed State Government agencies choose to lead and communicate during the amalgamation process will be critical to realising the value from this change.

Most often failure is not attributable to the structure of the amalgamation, but to cultural conflict and poor communication. In this three part series, Deloitte investigate the people related challenges and opportunities triggered by the WA amalgamations. The series begins with leadership and communication. Opportunities relating to organisation design and culture will be the second and third topic explored.

The reality is that right now, employees will be nervous about the changes. Having access to leaders to ask questions, understand the timelines and the process will give them more confidence in the reform, alleviate some level of anxiety by dispelling myths or “the rumour mill” and clarify expectations.

Communicating key messages in a timely way and before they appear in the media is ideal, but not always possible. The only constant in life is change, and some employees adapt more readily than others. The fact that the leaders themselves are also going through the amalgamation process could be a binding factor and an opportunity to show empathy.

Leadership and communication are critical people-related attributes that will help stabilise agencies prior to 1 July and following the amalgamation, and begin the process of capturing the maximum value from the process.

Strong, aligned leadership

Effective integration begins at the top

Now that the decision to amalgamate is confirmed, it is up to agency leaders to lead the change in bringing the agencies together as smoothly as possible. The following will help drive smooth amalgamations:

• Bring leaders together early to agree on the benefits, opportunities and challenges presented by the Government’s announcement of the amalgamations. There are strong business reasons that sit behind the decision including integrated service delivery and a better experience for customers, as well as cost efficiencies and focusing on delivering public value. The value in this session is bringing leaders together across all agencies that have been amalgamated and to begin the alignment process.

• Create a framework for holding leaders accountable during the amalgamation process – it is critical that there is a feedback loop and employees feel engaged. Ensuring all feedback goes through a centralised communication team is also important, so that any concerns or themes emerging through feedback can be identified and addressed.

• Ask leaders to put themselves in the shoes of their employees, including outlining how their employees are currently experiencing the amalgamation. Describe what is it that they need to know or want to know about the changes. This enables leaders to emphasise key issues with their team ahead of distributing key messages.

• Consider how leaders can involve employees in the change. Engage team members by asking them for ideas for how the new agency can best create value by collaborating with the other agencies to solve problems at a system level. Greater ownership and the ability to influence change will drive employee engagement, which is especially important to “millennials” who are more likely to leave organisations during periods of disruption.

• Showcase the quick wins where amalgamation objectives are achieved, particularly to customers. Communicate and celebrate when those quick wins are realised and recognise those who helped achieve them.

Ultimately, leaders should understand that communication has the power to drive the realisation of amalgamation goals.
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Communication essentials

Fighting rumours with facts

Ensuring that all key stakeholders and customers are communicated to with regard to the changes will help to ensure a smooth transition. The following will support this drive:

• **Develop a clear communications strategy.** The most effort should be channelled into those with the greatest influence on the success of the amalgamation and those most impacted by the change.

• **Widely define the stakeholders of the agency.** Change and communication should be thought of more widely than just internal stakeholders. Who are the partners of each of the agencies? Where are they common and where do they intersect? Which agency has the strongest connection? Develop a plan for how the newly created agency will communicate during this period of change and consistency of message to these parties is key.

• **Bring employees of the agencies together in an informal setting** so connections can begin to form.

• **Develop engaging supporting material** for leaders to communicate. This will help leaders be highly visible and especially communicative from very early on in the change process.

• **Consider all channels of communication and those that best suit employees.** For example, how do you best communicate with employees in the field, working remotely, in regional areas or working flexibly? Emails are not always the answer, so consider an inexpensive communications app for mobile devices, posters in common areas or a roadshow targeting regional offices.

• **Reassure leaders that it is OK to say that you just don’t know the answer yet.** Give an estimate of when the information or an answer is expected to be known and then try not to miss that date. Make sure key questions that are repeatedly asked are incorporated into any agency-wide communications.

Success or failure of the amalgamation is not determined on or after 1 July 2017. It starts now that the amalgamations have been announced. Strong, aligned leadership during the preparation phase, role-modelling collaboration, building trust and honesty through the process, acting with integrity and leading with empathy will all be hallmarks of the most successful agency amalgamations. It is also important to remember that successful amalgamations take time to achieve.
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Keys to achieving results

Make it happen
Mobilise a team of influential people to structure, design and drive leadership and communications activities.

Start now
Leaders are often reluctant to share information about an amalgamation until all of the integration details have been agreed. But unless agency leaders communicate with employees, there’s nothing to keep the rumour mill in check. And, in most cases, the resulting rumours and imaginary fears are much worse than reality.

Establish a two-way dialogue
Give employees and stakeholders a chance to voice their feelings, concerns and ideas. People are more likely to get on board when they feel as if they are involved in the process.

Provide frequent updates
Communication during amalgamation is an ongoing process, not a one-off event. Communicate early and often, providing information updates as the integration unfolds. Strive for consistent messaging over time – and across stakeholder groups – but don’t feel as if you need to be perfect. This is a challenging time, and people understand that.
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