USING THE RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT THEORY TO CREATE AN INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS PLAN FOR MERGERS OR ACQUISITIONS

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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Rationale

One of the most unique, and often challenging, scenarios in which organizations must effectively communicate is the occurrence of a merger or acquisition that directly affects at least one of their operating locations. These situations can cause a multitude of emotions and reactions in employees at every level of the organization, and it is the responsibility of the corporation and its upper level executive management team to keep employees informed and engaged, even during times of uncertainty. Although not always popular with employees, “it is the most efficient way for corporations pursuing a growth strategy to obtain external human resources, financial resources, and expand their operational domain” (Yeh-Yun Lin & We, 2006, p. 96).

Further, Buffington explained “There are two generally accepted reasons for firms to merge or acquire one another: (1) financially motivated reasons, e.g., creating value for the shareholders, or (2) non-value maximizing reasons, e.g., management desires to increase sales or growth, generate prestige, or increase compensation” (2004, p. 106). However, many organizations fail to consider the effect these transactions may have on their employees, failing to make an adequate internal communications plan to supplement their other merger/acquisition strategies. Instead, they often focus primarily on the legal and regulatory elements necessary to successfully close. Yet, it is dangerous and potentially damaging to ignore the importance of communication if an organization wishes to successfully emerge from these transactions.

Therefore, it is critical that an organization recognizes the value of creating an internal communications plan that works in conjunction with the other elements of a merger or acquisition action plan. Just as experts in the fields of finance or law may be relied upon for their expertise, so too must public relations practitioners be entrusted with the ability to develop a communications plan during this crucial time in a company’s development. The Relationship
Management Theory, popularized by Ledingham and Bruning, emphasizes looking at public relations in terms of a more managerial approach. The authors explained their belief by stating “the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends” (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000, p. 142). This represents a strong foundation from which to examine the communications techniques public relations managers should incorporate when formulating their internal communications response during a merger or acquisition. These public relations professionals can have a tremendous impact on the successful navigation of a merger/acquisition, creating strategies that support transparent communication and employee inclusion. Focusing on the relationship principles rather than the strict communicative processes will help companies to maintain their existing employee relationships and refine their own internal communication techniques to create a culture that not only adapts to change, but thrives as a result.
According to the Institute of Mergers, Acquisitions, and Alliances, nearly 40,000 of these deals took place in 2013 alone. Given these statistics, it is imperative that organizations incorporate communication relative to these transactions as part of their internal communications plan. This statement was reiterated by Peet, who stated “as companies pursue these relationships, internal communications become critical” (1997, p. 16). In order to understand how best to formulate an internal communications plan that works to the organization’s advantage, it is essential to examine the research that presently exists on related topics. The literature review contained in this chapter will explore the following areas: relationship management, internal communications, change communication, and merger or acquisition communication.

Relationship Management

Relationships have been an important part of constructing successful businesses and maintaining strong ties with the internal and external publics. While many methods of understanding and theorizing public relations have seen relationships as only a part of the larger picture, relationship management places the greatest emphasis on the relationships themselves. As such, the Relationship Management Theory is an evolution of the different methods of studying public relations that was first popularized in the late 20th century by John A. Ledingham and Stephen D. Bruning in their 2001 work, Public Relations as Relationship Management: A Relational Approach to the Study and Practice of Public Relations. Through their exploration into relationships, the authors developed the foundational viewpoint that “good relationships with employees also increase the likelihood that they will be satisfied with the organization and with their jobs, which makes them more likely to support and less likely to interfere with the mission of the organization” (p. 33). This theory recognizes the importance of employees and
may have a positive effect on the overall organization-employee relationship. As stated by Water, “the new emphasis on building, nurturing, and maintaining relationships with publics has become a dominant thread of research, and per Ledingham’s (2003) suggestion, may have become a general theory of public relations” (p. 613). This belief also allows for greater validation when considering public relations objectives in the scope of overall organizational goals, as there has been difficulty in the past quantifying the outcomes of this department in the balance sheet driven corporate environment.

It is important to recognize that the inclusion of the Relationship Management Theory as a method of public relations theoretical application demonstrates a shift in understanding of the fundamental skills necessary to succeed in this field. Ledingham and Bruning, often recognized as the foremost leaders in the emergence of this theory, emphasized this departure in thinking by stating “public relations traditionally has been described by what it does. The notion of relationship management is an attempt to define the field in term of what it is” (2001, p. 56). By incorporating the relationship element into its communication strategy, an organization can expect a more fruitful exchange with its internal and external publics. This function is not limited to only certain members of the organization, however, and should be a primary focus of everyone within the company. Specific to internal communications, “relationships with employees and members are the responsibility of all members of management” (Ledingham & Bruning, 2001, p. 109). He suggested that by maintaining strong relationships with their employees, organizations cultivate a credible source of information about the company and create a culture of pride that will support the objectives of the organization both inside and outside of its walls.
Relationship management also provides another method of learning how to balance the needs of management with those of other organizational publics, such as employees. The authors said “The relational perspective is said to clarify the function of public relations within an organizational structure and to provide a framework for determining the contribution of public relations to attainment of organizational goals” (p. 466). Keeping these organizational goals in mind are important when creating a public relations strategy because it helps to assure that all elements of a communication plan are in line with the overall direction of the organization as a whole.

In addition, Ledingham and Bruning reported: “with relationships – not communication – as the domain of public relations, the overarching principles of public relations must be derived not from communication theory, but from that of relationships” (p. 469).

Therefore, it is fair to say that for any corporation to thrive, the inclusion of public relations managers that understand the importance of relationships, as well as communication, is essential. This is also an opportunity for validation of the field and its practitioners in a corporate world often consumed by measurable objectives, such as financial statements. This knowledge of and contribution to company goals will also assist communicators to convince corporate leaders that public relations contributes concrete value, although it cannot always be easily calculated on a balance sheet. Katherine Woodall stated in “The Future of Business Communication,” “the future of organizational communication will rest on greater levels of alignment with business goals and measurement to demonstrate tangible results” (2006, p. 514). This alignment is essential because it incorporates public relations as a managerial function in the business world by incorporating principles such as analysis, planning, implantation and evaluation (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). These elements bring validity to public relations by tying the field directly
into the overall objectives of the organization, rather than its previous position of an abstract communications function that cannot be measured.

Organizations need to find the right place to position public relations within their operations to achieve the greatest return on their investment. According to Ledingham and Bruning (1999), organizations need to recognize the ways in which corporate leaders can affect their key publics, as well as how these publics can influence them. However, it is not enough to know how an organization’s publics, both internal and external, can have an effect on its operations. Several authors, such as James Grunig and Larissa Grunig, have emphasized the importance of maintaining this relationship very carefully; with a sense of equity and fairness in order to succeed. Without this, a distinct imbalance will exist. Yet with the understanding that a symmetrical relationship provides the opportunity for greater benefits, organizations can develop an approach for creating meaningful dialogue, which can be essential during times of uncertainty, such as those that often surround a merger or acquisition.

Grunig and Grunig reported: “the crucial symmetrical concepts that can help to facilitate the organization-public relationship involve creating a sense of openness, trust, and understanding between the organization and the key publics, as well as a willingness to negotiate, collaborate, and mediate solutions to issues of concern to both the organization and critical publics” (1992, p. 160).

With this recognition, an organization can develop an approach for creating meaningful dialogue, which can be essential during times of uncertainty, such as those that often surround a merger or acquisition. Ledingham agreed with this assertion in his 2001 text *Public Relations As Relationship Management*, by stating “[organizations] can build relationships more effectively if
we build symmetrical ones, which benefit both organizations and publics, than if we build asymmetrical ones that benefit only the organization (2001, p. 27).

In addition, Ledingham and Hendrix defined the following groups that are important to consider when developing relationships: employees, members, the community, the government, investors, consumers and the media (1998, p. 106). By recognizing each of these publics for their unique characteristics, as well as finding the ways in which tactics can be successfully applied across the boundaries that define these groups, organizations can develop relationships that treat their publics fairly, encourage two-way communication and give each group the attention it deserves. Ledingham and Bruning (1999) stressed the importance of two-way communication, asserting that the organization and public must engage in a dialogue, rather than simply on a one-way model where the organization distributes messages and the public only receives them. The willingness to work together is often what bridges the gap between organizational success and failure during a merger or acquisition, as employees must be given the proper details about the transaction and also feel empowered to share their own perspectives about the deal.

**Internal Communications**

Internal communications has gained ground as one of the increasingly popular niche area of corporate communications. Research by such authors as Peet (1997) and Vercic, Vercic and Sriramesh (2012) supports the belief that the failure to engage employees in a dynamic, value-driven internal communications relationship is a risky endeavor for an organization focused on responding to the needs of its constituents. Peet argued against overlooking the importance of employee communications can spell disaster for an organization, stating “Without employee buy-in and support for a company's strategic goals, vital corporate initiatives create their own stumbling blocks and can grind to a halt” (1997, p. 16). It is often during times of change and
uncertainty that employee advocates become some of the strongest potential advocates for an organization’s developing mission, and the leadership responsible for formulating successful communication strategies must recognize this in order to thrive. This can be through more formal, departmentally-managed methods, as well as the less formal “grapevine” type of communications that are prevalent inside organizations of varying shape and size (Welch & Jackson, 2007).

At its most basic essence, internal communication allows for a dialogue between organizations and their employees that provides each group with the ability to contribute to the overall strategy of the organization as a whole. In addition, this dialogue contributes to the development of a two-way communication structure that allows an organization to effectively craft communication plans taking into account management and employee needs at different levels throughout the organization. Numerous authors, including Welch (2007) and Gilly and Wolfinbarger (1998) have stressed the importance of internal communication by emphasizing its value in terms of exchanging information, building employee ownership, and creating a mutual understanding between all organizational publics. This may be why internal communications is no longer an obscure term often misplaced as a function of the Human Resources function of an organization and instead is now viewed as one of the fastest growing segments of public relations (Vercic, 2012). However, as suggested by Welch (2012) it is necessary for those engaged in the practice of internal communication to learn how to reach employees in an effective manner that is also easy to understand. This requirement emphasizes the importance of including public relations practitioners in the formulation of employee messages, as these individuals have greater aptitude in message creation than others in traditional business disciplines, such as human resources.
Public relations managers can also advocate for the importance of communicating with employees at all levels of the organization. In a 2014 article, Men claimed “internal communication is one of the most dominant and important activities in organizations because it helps individuals and groups coordinate activities to achieve goals, and [is] vital in socialization, decision-making, problem-solving, and change-management processes” (2014, p. 256). Employees must also understand internal communication in terms of their own positions, as this will play a key role in creating a wider comprehension of the principles being communicated. It is natural to expect that an employee will most likely wish to learn about the security of his or her own position, an idea supported by Ruck and Welch (2011). Given the highly personal nature with which many individuals treat their jobs, as well as how profoundly a merger or acquisition can affect many elements of an individual’s life, it is important to take every possible measure to minimize confusion around these communication efforts. Although each employee may understand messages differently, the majority of employees will likely share the same primary concerns, thereby making the construction of far-reaching, widely applicable messages easier for those involved in the creation and delivery of an internal communications plan. It is also important to create an environment that encourages two-way communication in order to allow those in roles of responsibilities to hone their messages appropriately.

Specific to the internal communications tactics used during mergers or acquisitions, companies must emphasize how they intend to maintain stability in the organization. Keeping the focus on the employees will allow an organization to demonstrate its commitment to its internal stakeholders (Peet, 1997). Because these stakeholders have various nuances and may require unique communication techniques, it is important that organizations use those methods with which employees have grown accustomed to avoid the risk of confusion or lost meaning within
these messages. Relying upon communication fundamentals, as recommended by both Peet (1997) and Kobel (2010), will help senior leadership develop simple, credible, and trustworthy messages that have the greatest chance of being understood by team members at all levels of the organization. Also important is developing messages that employ a variety of different channels, both formal and informal, as this will also increase the likelihood that messages are accurately comprehended.

Relative to mergers, the overall value of communication cannot be understated. However, as much of the attention dedicated to mergers and acquisitions is often devoted to the financial aspects (Fried, 1996), communication is often overshadowed. As a complement to these elements, employee satisfaction and communication can help contribute to maintaining employee morale, one of the most important, yet often overlooked, indicators of organizational health (Gutknecht & Keys, 1993). In fact, increasing communication may actually help improve organizational health during change and account for a higher level of employee satisfaction during this volatile time. There must be a delicate balance between the amount of information and the timing of this information’s distribution, as employees will come to not only expect honest communication, but also expect it to be timely.

In order to be effective and maintain organizational integrity, communication needs to be proactive, rather than reactive. Taking the time to anticipate potential difficulties and also find ways to celebrate the successes of a communication plan is an important step to creating a meaningful organizational tool. Planning is another essential element of an effective communication plan, and according to Smith (2014), this can be achieved by developing simple messages that are thoughtfully created in line with overall organizational objectives. Therefore, management must communicate directly with employees and other internal stakeholders prior to
moving the message outward. This helps employees to understand their stake in the organization’s overall strategy and feel as though the organization appreciates and values their opinions. Several authors, including Allred, Boal, and Holstein (2005) have advocated for the increase of communication during a merger, as opposed to a decrease that may be preferred by members of management who are hesitant to share too many details or provide information that may be incorrect. However, knowing that employees will find ways to discover the information they seek, it is wise for management and members of the communications team to get in front of the messages they want to disseminate rather than waiting for the questions to come to them.

Schweiger said: “It seems that the only way for management to deal with the anxiety that follows a merger or acquisition announcement is to communicate with employees as soon as possible about all the anticipated effects of the change. Failure to do so will increase uncertainty and employees’ willingness to rely on rumors, which can further increase anxiety” (1991, p. 111).

The emphasis on increasing communication, rather than avoiding it, can be very helpful for an organization hoping to improve its relationship with employees during times of change.

**Change Communication**

Employees are often hesitant to accept change, as it may represent an upheaval of the practices or habits that define their specific roles. With this upset in understanding often comes an increase in negativity, unhappiness, or displeasure with the organization as a whole, regardless of the source of the change. As related by Barrett, “organizational change is difficult whether the impetus is a merger or acquisition, new venture, new process improvement approach, re-engineering, or any number of the flavors-of-the-day management fads” (2004, p. 219). Even though there may not be any negative correlation between the absence of
communication and information availability, employees may be more naturally inclined to believe that not hearing anything immediately means something bad has happened. Therefore, an organization needs to be especially careful about how often it communicates and whether or not the cadence of information is appropriate to keep employees informed and educated. While too much information runs the risk of making the situation a bit less clear, too little information can be dangerous, as it may make employees believe their organization does not have their best interests at heart and is taking steps to hide things. Schweiger summarized this through his observation that “Regardless of its cause, any failure to communicate leaves employees uncertain about their futures, and it is often that uncertainty, rather than the changes themselves, that is so stressful for employees” (1991, p. 110). Therefore, the establishment of a transition team, as advocated by Roach (2004), holds strong promise for an organization. This group of individuals can focus solely on details related to the merger or acquisition, and should include a dedicated internal communications professional in the interest of maintaining an open and honest relationship with employees.

Communicating clearly about change can help to lessen the uncertainty surrounding the adjustments within an organization and bring a greater sense of comfort to employees. Bordia, et al. (1998) claimed “change communication can provide information that helps people understand and deal with the change process” (p. 513). Therefore, the authors continued, “management communication is one of the most commonly used and advocated strategies in reducing employee uncertainty during change” (Bordia et al., 2004, p. 513). This idea is supported by Clampitt, DeKoch and Cashman (2001) who stated that well-developed communication strategies are essential in helping an organization that not only accepts change but thrives on environments that challenge their employees to constantly keep improving.
This obligation to share information is inherent to the structure of a successful organization, and it cannot be limited to only sharing good news. It is the responsibility of a well-rounded organization to keep its employees informed of all changes that will affect them, whether these may be seen as positive or negative (Byrne & LeMay, 2006). Gutknecht and Keys (1993) concurred with this belief and actually asserted that it is of greater worth to increase the amount of communication and interaction between employees and management during times of change, as these are often some of the most volatile stages in an organization’s development. Barrett underscored this, stating “what some companies still do not realize is that without effective employee communication, change is impossible and change management fails” (2001, p. 219). Therefore, it is of great importance that an organization not only possesses a change management plan but develop one that includes a well-planned and realistic communication strategy (Schweiger, 1991).

Considering the majority of employees are resistant to change, it is important that those in leadership positions are comfortable in communicating with all members of the organization. This requires that organizational leaders seek methods that are accessible to and preferred by the employees they are designed to reach. These may vary from organization to organization but must remain constant in schedule and truthful in content, despite the channels chosen by an organization. Therefore, according to Lotz and Donald, “formal and informal channels of communication need to be used in order to manage rumours and negative perceptions” (2006, p. 6).

However, this does not remove members of management from responsibility for communicating. According to a study related to communicating about uncertainty, Clampitt, deKoch and Cashman noted “employees routinely report that they prefer to receive information
from their immediate supervisor” (2000, p. 43). This harkens back to the elements of relationship management that are important for maintaining employee satisfaction and contentment during times of change. Barrett agreed with this notion in an article that stated “effective employee communication uses all vehicles to reach its audiences, but most importantly, it relies on direct, face-to-face communication over indirect, print, or electronic media” (2001, p. 221). Managers must become attuned to developing communication strategies that work for their direct reports, given the aforementioned preference of employees to receive their information from supervisors or other departmental leaders. Their ability to communicate effectively during a difficult situation, such as a merger or acquisition, can be a defining factor in how well an organization emerges from a challenge.

**Merger and Acquisition Communication**

Numerous types of unanticipated change can be incredibly disruptive to an organization, and mergers and acquisitions are among those that have the potential to cause the most negative impact. These events can bring about a great deal of uncertainty to an organization and its employees, especially since the latter group often does not foresee these events in their professional futures.

This is why, according to Galpin and Herndon, “All the people involved in the integration effort should be given continuous communication and feedback, which will help them understand the progress that is being made. Gathering feedback from the organization also helps in identifying areas that need even more attention as the effort progresses. Constant communication and feedback are the oil of a well-run integration machine” (2007, p. 252).
This underscores the importance of having a communications professional as part of a merger or acquisition committee, as they may likely be the best prepared to communicate the nuances of these deals.

Merger-related communications are a niche of corporate communication best left to the expertise held by someone in the public relations field. Given their formalized training and professional experience, these individuals are the best prepared to develop the type of communications that build employee trust and organizational commitment. Authors such as Ivancevich, Schweiger and Power first posited this belief in their 1989 article, “A communication system will facilitate top management leadership and support for employees during this crucial period and will continue to be useful throughout the ensuing stages of the merger process” (p. 28). Authors continued to study this phenomenon in later studies, such as that published by Peet (1997), which argued for the inclusion of a communications team member on the merger task force. The establishment of this special group, whose duties would be limited to only those specifically related to the successful execution of a merger or acquisition, would allow adequate time for communication professionals to craft useful messages in appropriate arenas to support education related to the merger or acquisition (Galpin and Herndon (2007).

Given that there is often a great deal of uncertainty in surrounding times of change, it is also necessary that those communicating during these unsteady periods make messages as clear as possible. Bordia reinforced this by stating, “during a merger employees may experience uncertainty about the nature and form of the merged organization, impact of the merger on their work unit and the likely changes to their job role” (2004, p. 509). The impact the change may have in relation to personal work role is the most obvious concern for employees and, as such, should carry tremendous weight in the formulation of a relevant communication strategy. In
articles published by Lotz and Donald (2006) and Galpin and Herndon (2007), this was emphasized with a strong reliance on the clarity and consistency of the messages to be delivered. Using these two standards for the messages that are created helps to ensure that employees will feel as though they can rely on their organization to keep them informed of the changes that have the potential to affect their lives.

The struggle of balancing the amount of information to be communicated with that information that the company is allowed to share, especially at the level of detail employees desire, is often difficult. Although this may present obstacles, given the details of what can and cannot be shared, “the challenge here is to strike a balance between the need for secrecy and the inevitable fact that the more you communicate, the smoother the internal transition” (Peet, 1997, p. 17). Related to this, Schweiger (1991) stated “Management might prefer communicating nothing to communicating information that later turns out to be incorrect. Perhaps managers should communicate what they know and insure that employees are never intentionally deceived” (p. 111). This belief has been one of the foundational points of numerous scholarly research articles related to communication strategies during change situations, all of which emphasized the importance of structuring messages that are truthful, consistent and reliable.

However, it is not enough to only develop strategies of distributing messages to employees; top management needs to find ways to encourage feedback that will allow them to hone their messages. This can be done through formalized channels, such as team briefings that include question and answer periods, or less formal methods, such as an open door policy that invites employees to ask questions without the fear of penalty or judgment. This can also help to balance the level of information that can be shared with the level of detail that is often desired by employees. Explaining things in clear terms, as well as inviting employees to provide their
reactions and feedback, may help to mitigate the confusion that occurs during a merger or acquisition. Smith (2014) noted “there is a delicate balance that must be kept between sharing too much information too soon and making sure your key audiences are brought ‘in the loop’ at the right time to allow for questions to be answered, confidence to be maintained, and support to be garnered” (p. 10). Organizations undergoing these types of change scenarios find themselves at the mercy of the government and the details they are permitted to share prior to the deal’s completion. While organizations must comply with these regulations, their failure to provide too much information may be misinterpreted as dishonesty or deliberate secrecy. Therefore, it is important that those responsible for developing the communication strategy related to a merger or acquisition recognize this and plan accordingly (Lotz & Donald, 2006).

Above all else, employees desire to feel that their contributions are still worthwhile and appreciated by their organization, even during times of uncertainty. Maintaining a strong employee network and making strong efforts to keep a team together is an important part of demonstrating that an organization is committed to preserving the integrity of its employee assets. However, communicators should not over-promise in an effort to ease employee uncertainty.

As such, Buffington (2004) recommended the following: “Focus instead on developing strategies that satisfy employees’ information needs at three different levels: 1) contextual – what is happening in the environment that has required change (in this case a merger); 2) strategic – what the company goals are and how the company plans to reach these goals; and 3) personal – how these changes impact employees on a day-to-day basis” (p. 1).
Developing a strategy that incorporates these three distinct elements helps to place the communication strategy in terms that an employee will relate to and appreciate.
Methodology

The Relationship Management Theory popularized by John A. Ledingham and Stephen D. Bruning stood as the theoretical framework used to determine the elements that are essential to an internal communications plan specific to a merger or acquisition. Many of the fundamental tenets of this theory can be found in their 2001 text, *Public Relations as Relationship Management: A Relational Approach to the Study and Practice of Public Relations*, as well as through chapters and articles about this topic published in *Public Relations Theory II* (2006) and *Public Relations Review* (1998 and 1999). It is important to recognize the work of Ledingham and Bruning, as their approach represents a shift in how employees need to be seen and understood by their employer. It is necessary to undertake a relationship that relies on the exchange of two-way dialogue, as Ledingham and Bruning (2001) explained “communication is “a strategic management function (that helps) manage relationships with key publics that affect organizational mission, goals, and objectives” (p. 183).

As the Relationship Management Theory relates to a merger or acquisition, the importance of facilitating the creation and maintenance of these fundamental relationships cannot be underscored. Considering these transactions often place specific efforts, both in the form of talent acquisition and skill development, in place to maintain relationship integrity with employees, formulating a plan built on the Relationship Management Theory is a viable option for all communicators looking to create this type of communications plan. This is because its focus on relationships, rather than simply the communication forms, message amount or message channels, makes it more appropriate than other theories in terms of merger and acquisition plan development. Ledingham and Bruning stated, “in today’s practice, program success of failure is
determined by the *quality* of organization-public relationships rather than the *quantity* of messages produced or the number of messages placed in the media” (2001, p. 740).

A literature review of current scholarly literature relative to internal communication, change communication, and the Relationship Management Theory was conducted to evaluate previous research and examine the similarities found within to best understand the different types of examinations into these interrelated subjects had been made to this point. An online survey was created and distributed, via email invitation, to a purposive sample of potential respondents currently employed by a Midwest corporation presently affected by a merger/acquisition. Responses were sought from team members at various levels, from the manufacturing floor to vice presidential level, to allow for a wide range of responses that would capture the viewpoints of different populations within the organization. Once approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ball State University, the survey was implemented in February, 2015. Internet access was required for survey completion, as it was created using Survey Monkey. Ten questions were included in the survey. Questions included demographic characteristics, length of employment with company, level of position and desired type and source of communications. Following the completion and compilation of survey data, elements of the plan, including strategies, goals and personnel requirements, were developed based on how best to reach the employees of the affected organization in an honest, forthcoming method.
Survey Findings

Participants for this study were identified using social media sites LinkedIn and Facebook. Potential respondents within the author’s network received an introductory email explaining the survey and emphasizing the anonymous nature of its content. No monetary reimbursement or other incentives were offered for completing the survey. This was done to assure respondents that their feedback would be treated confidentially. Following their consent to participate, these individuals received a link to the survey via direct message on either LinkedIn or Facebook.

The survey was constructed using the online survey tool “Survey Monkey.” It began with two questions regarding participants’ ages and length of employment with their present organization before moving into eight questions specifically focused on communications tactics utilized during the merger or acquisition at their organization. These questions were designed to determine how employees felt related to the present state of their organization as related to the merger or acquisition and results were collected only from individuals that are presently employed by organizations currently undergoing a merger or acquisition. A total of 36 individuals responded to the survey.

The survey was comprised of questions designed to garner employees’ impressions related to the current state of their organization in undergoing a merger or acquisition. Questions were primarily multiple choice but did allow for the respondents to provide their own feedback through the inclusion of an “Other” option. Although the survey was anonymous and did not collect any names, demographic questions were included. Ages of the respondents are shown in the first table on the following page.
Table 1
*Employee Ages*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 to 24</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 to 34</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>44.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 44</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 to 54</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 to 64</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, information related to how long respondents had been working for their present place of employment was collected. This was done in an effort to establish a framework of demographics for those individuals that responded to the survey.

Table 2
*Employment Length*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of Employment (years)</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 to 5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>36.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>44.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 to 15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 to 20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26+</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey findings taken from age range and length of employment suggest that the respondents, which were not all employed by the same company, primarily fall into the same demographic categories. Length of employment is not surprising, considering the number of years respondents worked at their present organization is an overall match to the age breakdown found in Table 1.
In order to understand the types of individuals that responded to the survey, it was necessary to determine their position classifications. This would also provide information on whether or not those responding to the survey were in positions that required them to communicate with their teams, or if they were in non-managerial roles that placed them largely on the receiving end of informational communications. It is worth noting that over 60% of the respondents fell into the professional or non-manager category. This suggests that those responding to the survey were not in positions to inform other employees in a formalized setting. Therefore, their positions within the company may have largely influenced their subsequent responses to later survey questions.

Table 3
*Position in Company*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position Classification</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional, Non-manager</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>55.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>36.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director or Above</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several of the remaining questions utilized ranking scales to gain an understanding on popular methods of communication, preferred methods of communication, and overall satisfaction with organizational communication efforts relative to the merger or acquisition. Choices for types of communication utilized and desired were developed based on previous research-based findings uncovered during the literature review.

Understanding the types of information that are important to employees was essential to constructing a plan that met these needs. Respondents were asked to rank each of the information types shown below on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the most important and 5 being the least
important. Given the personalized nature with which many employees approach their positions, personal options, such as job security and benefits, were included in addition to those that reached across the organization, such as leadership structure and completion timeline. Results for the ranking of each of these choices are shown below, with the numerical representation of responses as well as the weighted score for all selections. In this case, the highest weighted score demonstrates the most important information.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Merger Details and Related Importance</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Weighted Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Job Security</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>4.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Compensation and Benefits</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merger Completion Timeline</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Leadership Structure</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Corporate / Departmental Structure</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After selecting the types of information that were most important, participants were asked to provide feedback on their overall satisfaction with other elements of their organization’s communication strategy. Four rankings were presented: not at all satisfied, somewhat satisfied, satisfied, and very satisfied. This question directly correlated with the elements of timeliness, reliability, and structure that are often found in organizational communication strategies.
### Table 5
*Level of Satisfaction with Communication Elements*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at all Satisfied (%)</th>
<th>Somewhat Satisfied (%)</th>
<th>Satisfied (%)</th>
<th>Very Satisfied (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level of detail offered in communication</td>
<td>14.71</td>
<td>61.76</td>
<td>20.59</td>
<td>2.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schedule regularity of communication</td>
<td>21.21</td>
<td>51.52</td>
<td>21.21</td>
<td>6.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeliness of communication</td>
<td>23.53</td>
<td>47.06</td>
<td>26.47</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure of communication (e.g. sources, methods)</td>
<td>14.71</td>
<td>38.24</td>
<td>44.12</td>
<td>2.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement of two-way communication</td>
<td>8.82</td>
<td>64.71</td>
<td>23.53</td>
<td>2.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most popular selection for each of the strategic elements was somewhat satisfied. While this is not an overly negative rating, it does suggest that there is distinct room for improvement, specifically in terms of the level of detail offered and the encouragement of two-way communication. If an organization aspires to maintain its relationships with employees, it is essential that each of these are improved upon, specifically the two-way communication that encourages dialogue and feedback essential for navigating the often difficult situations encountered during a merger or acquisition.

Two of the survey questions, which were included in succession, used the same response options but held a distinct difference. While one question asked that respondents indicate what methods of communication had been their primary sources of information, the follow-up question requested that the respondents indicate their preferred sources. This was done to allow for a comparison between the sources of information employees used most frequently and the sources that employees identified as their desired methods. Results would then demonstrate
whether or not the organization’s most frequently utilized methods were those that the employees actually preferred to have presented to them. Choices included a mixture of written and verbal communication methods. The graph below shows the comparison between preferred sources and actual sources of information, and it should be noted that multiple selections were allowed in each of the source-related questions.

Figure 1
*Preferred Sources of Information vs. Actual Sources of Information*

The results above show large discrepancies between the preferred source and actual source of information in four categories: coworkers, supervisor, department meetings and company intranet. Whereas the company intranet may be the easiest and most convenient method for widely distributing information, as demonstrated the fact it had the highest ranking for the actual source, it ranked significantly lower as a preferred source of information. Instead, the
results suggest that employees would prefer a more personalized approach from a reliable source, which could be found through supervisor communication and department meetings. Supervisor ranked the highest in preferred source of information, and while this type of communication cannot be as broadly distributed throughout the organization, the individualized approach supports the belief that employees are interested in maintaining their connections to trusted resources during this time. It also supports the inclusion of relationship-based communication techniques during a merger or acquisition, which can be effectively practiced during team-oriented meetings and conversations.

Several critical factors were identified in relation to the success of an organization’s communication techniques, including the honesty and accuracy of the information shared and the appropriateness of the organization’s chosen communication techniques. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement level of agreement with statements regarding whether or not they agreed or disagreed with statements about the organization’s communication techniques. Responses were captured and converted into percentages to demonstrate which of the following choices was most prevalent: do not agree, somewhat agree, agree, or strongly agree. Responses to this question and the associated ratings of satisfaction for each statement are shown in the table on the following page:
Table 6

Assessment of Organization’s Communication Techniques

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Do Not Agree (%)</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree (%)</th>
<th>Agree (%)</th>
<th>Strongly Agree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I believe the information the company shares with me about the merger to</td>
<td>11.11</td>
<td>38.89</td>
<td>44.44</td>
<td>5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be honest and accurate.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe the information my supervisor shares with me about the merger</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>22.22</td>
<td>38.89</td>
<td>33.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to be honest and accurate.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe the company is using communication to maintain an open</td>
<td>14.29</td>
<td>42.86</td>
<td>34.29</td>
<td>5.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relationship with its employees during the merger.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe the company's communication techniques related to the merger</td>
<td>19.44</td>
<td>44.44</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have been appropriate.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have been given the opportunity to share my opinions and feedback</td>
<td>19.44</td>
<td>30.56</td>
<td>44.44</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>about the merger.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When reviewing these results, it is important to recognize that “Agree” was the most popular choice for many of the statements. While a majority of respondents do agree with the statement “I believe the information the company shares with me about the merger to be honest and accurate,” the results were not overwhelming. On the other hand, when “the company” was replaced with “my supervisor,” the results were markedly more positive. This suggests that not only do employees prefer to receive messages from their supervisor, but they also believe the information that comes from this source to generally be more believable than that distributed across the organization through more broad-reaching techniques. Even though the supervisors may present the same information that can be found in other organization-wide sources, employees believe their supervisors more strongly, likely due to the relationship that exists between these two parties.
While the responses to this question are more positive than the responses to level of satisfaction felt by employees, the percentage of respondents that would only “Somewhat Agree” with each of the aforementioned statements was still relatively high. However, it is significant to note that “Do Not Agree” did not have the highest percentage of the responses for each of the statements. Still, there is a lesson to be learned in that all of the “Do Not Agree” percentages, aside from the statement related to an employee’s supervisor, were over 10%. Being that all of the remaining statements were focused on the actions taken by the organization, this suggests that the communication efforts are lacking in effectivity with employees. This type of information should be collected by the organization during the merger, as it would allow the communications strategy to be redefined and redeveloped based on the feedback received from employees. The results of this question reinforce the importance of creating an open environment that encourages two-way communication, as employees need to know that their opinions are warranted and worthwhile. Knowing that they are valued in such a way allows for an employee to feel connected to the overall mission of their organization, even during times of change. Given the length of time involved in negotiating a merger or acquisition, an organization must maintain a dedicated strategy that focuses on keeping employees informed and satisfied, taking careful measures to understand the climate of employee satisfaction during this time and adjusting the communications strategy accordingly. Without this step, an organization runs the risk of losing their interest or support along the way, thereby potentially losing the allegiance of one of its strongest advocates.

These results were expanded upon in a later open ended question that offered participants the opportunity to share their opinion on what communication techniques would have been of greater benefit during the merger or acquisition process. It should be noted that this question was
not required for the survey to be deemed complete, but it was answered by 22 respondents, or roughly 61%. One of the most commonly found words in these responses was “more” – more direct communication, more personalized communication, more frequent communication and more interaction with leadership/senior management. This underscored the theme that frequent and reliable communication is desirable to employees affected by this type of transaction and has an important effect on the employees. These elements can be found in the following responses, which are taken verbatim from the survey collection site:

- “More personalized, what it means for my job, type of information”
- “More direct communication and QandA – this type of comm. has trailed off in recent months”
- “More personalized town hall meetings” / “More frequent town hall meetings”
- “More communication from those that have been included in early closed door meetings. Even if there isn’t pressing information, we still need to hear from our leaders.”
- “On going communications even if there nothing to communicate will help with transparency and belief from employees.”
- “Companywide meetings and internal communication directly with staff members rather than hearsay and gathering bits and pieces from other sources. Our merge overall has been a bit scattered and think on your feet rather than organized and planned. This was a first time merger for both agencies and many details have been overlooked leading to misinformation and confusion.”
- “I would have liked to receive more personalized information catered to my own job, rather than blanket statements about the future of the company overall. A lot of
information was contradictory. Leadership would say they would do everything possible to save people's jobs but then go back and tell us that it was only natural to expect there to be layoffs. This has been a confusing time, and more focus on the emotions we were feeling than just telling the information they were being fed by the company would have been helpful.”

The final question of the survey related to the overall employee satisfaction in relation to the communication techniques employed during the merger. Although this question was much broader in scope and did not allow for any outside commentary, results fell in line with those that had been found in the responses to the preceding questions. The exact responses to the question of “Overall, how would you rate the level of communication between senior leadership and employees during the merger?” are as follows:

Table 7
Overall Communication Rating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication Rating</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Good</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Good</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Good</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Body of Project

In order to develop an internal communications plan, specific to a merger or acquisition, that meets the needs of employees affected by this transaction, the elements of greatest importance were defined by the results of the online survey and previously conducted research. This will allow for the creation of plan elements that incorporate specific objectives meant to provide a greater sense of awareness of company developments among affected employees.

As this plan is based on the theoretical framework of the Relationship Management Theory, it focuses heavily on maintaining relationships with current employees by creating a plan that emphasizes inclusion, information sharing and two-way communication. This plan uses elements broad enough in scope that will allow it to be applied to numerous types of corporate, for-profit organizations based in the United States that are currently involved in a merger or acquisition with another United States-based corporate organization. Given the fact that mergers and acquisitions have become increasingly prevalent in the corporate landscape, the development of a plan that focuses on the preservation of employee relationships and the strategic decisions necessary to maintain strong connections with employees represents a valuable addition to the field of internal communications research. As such, the plan elements are based on the findings of the online survey and will incorporate internal communications tactics to be utilized at several critical junctures as related to a merger or acquisition: immediately following the announcement, during the transaction as other activities following the announcement of the merger or acquisition are conducted, such as legal and regulatory filings and following the completion of the deal. This will provide a full spectrum view of the necessary internal communication activities that should be undertaken with this type of corporate activity.
Job Description:

Merger/Acquisition Task Force and Internal Communications Manager

It is essential that a distinctive functional area is devoted to creating and maintaining an internal communications plan that responds to the dynamic communications needs that arise during a merger or acquisition. The individuals responsible for creating this plan need to have a strong understanding of internal communications, suggesting that the most likely participants will originate from the fields of Human Resources and Communication/Public Relations. However, in addition to their subject-specific knowledge, these individuals also need to possess the business acumen to understand how the elements of an internal communications plan can support an organization’s strategy for maintaining strong employee relationships during a merger or acquisition.

As an organization may desire to create a specialized role dedicated to communicating the details of the merger or acquisition, the following Job Description has been created to fill the position of Internal Communications Manager necessary for this team:

**Job Title:** Internal Communications Manager

**Job Status:** Full Time

**Department:** Corporate Communications

**Job Summary:** The Internal Communications Manager will serve as a member of the Corporate Communications team and be responsible for the development and dissemination of messages identified as corporate communications, most specifically, those related to a merger or acquisition. This individual will provide guidance and counsel to business leaders and senior management related to the development of a successful internal communications strategy. This
will include construction of messages using a variety of multimedia platforms, as well as the development of talking points to be utilized during company and departmental meetings. The ability to manage simultaneous communication projects and maintain a high level of confidentiality is essential.

**Job Responsibilities**

- Formulate an internal communications strategy relative to communicating during a merger or acquisition that spans from the announcement to the close of the transaction
- Lead and/or coordinate the creation of key communications strategies and messages related to a merger or acquisition, including but not limited to the development of intranet site content, newsletter articles, blog postings
- Develop strategic talking points to be used by members of senior leadership and departmental management during regularly-scheduled update meetings
- Research available communications options and recommend best course of action based on these evaluations
- Conduct organizational surveys to evaluate plan’s success and make adjustments/recommendations for future improvements based on survey findings
- Serve on merger or acquisition task force that ensures all communication deadlines are adhered to throughout organization to maintain schedule of
Qualifications

- Formalized training in public relations through a four-year degree program; special consideration given to individuals with focus on internal communications
- At least five years previous work experience in a communications or public relations environment in a for-profit corporation
- Previous experience working on a team involved in communicating details of a merger or acquisition
- Demonstrated ability to work in a cross-functional team, specifically a group that includes members of executive leadership and individuals from Human Resources
- Strong written and verbal communication skills
- Experience using a variety of different communication media, including forms of “new media” such as blogs or intranet sites
- Ability to maintain confidentiality of sensitive information

Internal Communications Plan

This is the suggested internal communications plan for organizations involved in mergers or acquisitions. It is based on a review of related literature focused on the types of communication most commonly used during these types of events, such as change communication. The plan is also founded in the principles of the Relationship Management Theory as a means to maintain the dynamics of the organization-employee relationship during a merger/acquisition.

In a recent survey of employees at organizations undergoing mergers or acquisitions, responses indicated a much stronger preference for more personalized, verbal communication
coupled with supplementary broad-reaching, impersonal written methods. However, both are necessary to create a plan that will be as widely applicable to multiple different employee groups within the company. The overall objectives of this internal communications plan are awareness of the details related to the transaction and acceptance of the information presented. As such, the goals, objectives, strategies and tactics of the plan can be outlined as follows:

**Goal:** Greater employee awareness of merger/acquisition details to maintain and enhance employee engagement

**Objective 1:** To have a positive effect on employee awareness of the merger/acquisition through personalized meetings that reach at least 80% of all employees

**Strategy 1.1:** Create a schedule of companywide meetings to be held on a bi-monthly basis, beginning with merger announcement and ending one week after official close of the transaction

**Tactic 1.1.1:** Schedule meeting to announce merger to employees immediately after transaction is confirmed, utilizing members of senior leadership, up to and including CEO/President, to explain merger during this meeting.

**Tactic 1.1.2:** Include time for questions at the end of the meeting and encourage employees to participate. Transcribe questions and put on intranet site for future reference.

**Tactic 1.1.3:** At conclusion of first companywide merger-related meeting, set schedule of when next meeting will occur and how communication will flow during transaction.
Strategy 1.2: Employ video messaging to reach employees

**Tactic 1.2.1:** Simultaneously broadcast announcement meeting to off-site employees via password-protected streaming link. Capture number of logins to measure viewers.

**Tactic 1.2.2:** Distribute summary of merger announcement meeting, including video, to employees within 2 days of occurrence.

**Tactic 1.2.3:** Record video messages delivered by members of senior leadership from various areas throughout the company that will be posted to company intranet on monthly basis. Use video messages to provide updates related to developments in merger or acquisition.

Strategy 1.3: Create schedule of departmental meetings to improve employee acceptance of merger

**Tactic 1.3.1:** Provide managers with monthly calendar invite to be distributed to individual department members to reserve meeting time.

**Tactic 1.3.2:** Develop general talking points to be utilized in departmental meetings to maintain transparency of messaging across the organization. Update talking points prior to each monthly meeting to include any new developments in merger/acquisition completion.

**Tactic 1.3.3:** Collect feedback from departmental managers to create specialized messages that relate to each individual department to update employees on the topics of greatest importance to them, based on job function.
Strategy 1.3: Encourage less formal dialogue among employees within the same job function (e.g. sales, accounting)

Tactic 1.3.1: Assign members of merger/acquisition task force to act as facilitators in monthly small group discussions of between 6-10 people from the same functional areas.

Goal: Encourage employee participation and engagement in merger process to develop personal connection between employees and the organization

Objective 2: Increase comprehension of the merger/acquisition process through communication materials developed based on a baseline of employee understanding

Strategy 2.1: Make intranet survey available throughout merger

Tactic 2.1.1: Develop anonymous online intranet survey site that contains questions about employee’s thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the merger or acquisition.

Tactic 2.1.2: Update survey questions with content relevant to stage of merger or acquisition to understand organizational climate at different phases of the transaction.

Strategy 2.2: Distribute bi-monthly newsletter with information about the merger

Tactic 2.2.1: Engage members of senior leadership and communication team to write articles for bi-monthly newsletter.
Tactic 2.2.2: Include question and answer section in each newsletter that contains copies of questions received through intranet survey and answers to these questions from appropriate member of leadership team.

Tactic 2.2.3: Post newsletter to corporate intranet site and provide link to all employees via email. Archive past editions of newsletter for future reference.

Tactic 2.2.4: To reach employees without access to computers, print hard copies of newsletter and distribute in break rooms and/or cafeteria.

Strategy 2.3: Publish weekly status updates

Tactic 2.3.1: Post weekly status updates on intranet homepage to briefly recap news of previous week. Display messages on monitors throughout organization’s locations.

Tactic 2.4.2: Maintain schedule of updates, even if no news occurred, in interest of message transparency.

Plan Implementation

This plan should be implemented as soon as a merger/acquisition is confirmed by members of senior leadership. The first order of business should be the construction of a dedicated merger/acquisition task force that is wholly focused on communicating the details of the transaction with other members of the organization. This group will allow for adequate focus to remain on the communication necessary during the merger without distracting from any of the other business functions that must continue during this time.
Although the tactics may require slight modification based on the speed with which the transaction progresses, the guidelines above provide a strong foundation for developing a plan that will come to be seen as reliable and believable by employees. This plan should also be continued throughout the duration of the merger/acquisition, up to and including the official close of the transaction. As shown in the preceding steps, the plan will incorporate a mixture of interpersonal techniques, relying heavily on creating conversations and encouraging discussion. The tone of the messages utilized throughout all of the verbal and written communications tools will be direct and honest, as it is vital that the organization is seen as trustworthy by its employees. This will also create the potential for greater believability of all messages associated with the merger/acquisition and demonstrate to employees that the organization wants to continue to engage them through the interpersonal communication methods they employ. In addition, transparency will be practiced in the dissemination of messages. For example, even if no updates are available, the schedule of providing additional information will be maintained with the notation that no new information has been collected. This will demonstrate that the organization is transparent with its employees.

Since employees are personally impacted by these transactions, it is in an organization’s best interest to maintain strong relationships with them in the interest of maintaining normal business operations, retaining employees, and avoiding a disruption in company culture. These organization-employee relationships can be strengthened by a strategy that employees a dynamic mix of verbal and written communication tactics. Several of these tactics also rely on employee participation, which creates a culture of inclusion and emphasizes the role in which the employee can personally play in the success of his or her own understanding of the merger.
The plan’s primary goal is to create a greater awareness of the details surrounding the merger, including both those details that affect the organization as a whole and those that will be felt at the individual employee level. As such, it is important to identify the events/initiatives and tactics, as well as the communication type and responsible parties, that will support the overall goal of increased employee awareness of merger details.

Table 8

*Communication Events, Tactics, and Responsible Parties*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event or Initiative</th>
<th>Tactic</th>
<th>Communication Type</th>
<th>Responsible Parties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Companywide Meeting</td>
<td>1.1.1 Schedule meeting immediately following merger</td>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>Senior leadership&lt;br&gt;Merger/Acquisition Task Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Companywide Meeting</td>
<td>1.1.2 Question and answer at the end of companywide meeting</td>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>Senior leadership&lt;br&gt;Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Companywide Meeting</td>
<td>1.1.3 Set schedule of upcoming companywide meetings</td>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>Senior leadership&lt;br&gt;Merger/Acquisition Task Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Video Messages</td>
<td>1.2.1 Simultaneously broadcast announcement meeting</td>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>Merger/Acquisition Task Force&lt;br&gt;Information Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Video Messages</td>
<td>1.2.2 Distribute summary of meeting, including video</td>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>Merger/Acquisition Task Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Video Messages</td>
<td>1.2.3 Record video messages from senior leadership and use to update employees</td>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>Senior leadership&lt;br&gt;Merger/Acquisition Task Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Departmental Meetings</td>
<td>1.3.1 Provide calendar invites</td>
<td>Verbal and Written</td>
<td>Merger/Acquisition Task Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Departmental Meetings</td>
<td>1.3.2 Develop talking points</td>
<td>Verbal and Written</td>
<td>Merger/Acquisition Task Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Departmental Meetings</td>
<td>1.3.3 Collect feedback to create personalized departmental topics</td>
<td>Verbal and Written</td>
<td>Merger/Acquisition Task Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Employee to Employee Dialogue</td>
<td>1.4.1 Facilitate informal, small group discussions</td>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>Merger/Acquisition Task Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Intranet Survey</td>
<td>2.1.1 Develop and publish anonymous online survey</td>
<td>Written</td>
<td>Merger/Acquisition Task Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Intranet Survey</td>
<td>2.1.2 Update survey questions based on stage of transaction</td>
<td>Written</td>
<td>Merger/Acquisition Task Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Bi-monthly Newsletter</td>
<td>2.3.1 Engage senior leadership and task force to write articles</td>
<td>Written</td>
<td>Merger/Acquisition Task Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Bi-monthly Newsletter</td>
<td>2.3.2 Include question and answer section in each newsletter</td>
<td>Written</td>
<td>Employees Senior leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Bi-monthly Newsletter</td>
<td>2.3.3 Post newsletter to intranet site and provide link via email</td>
<td>Written</td>
<td>Merger/Acquisition Task Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Bi-monthly Newsletter</td>
<td>2.3.4 Print hard copies for on-site distribution</td>
<td>Written</td>
<td>Merger/Acquisition Task Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Status Updates</td>
<td>2.3.1 Status updates on intranet and video monitors</td>
<td>Written</td>
<td>Merger/Acquisition Task Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Status Updates</td>
<td>2.3.2 Maintain schedule of updates in interest of message transparency</td>
<td>Written</td>
<td>Merger/Acquisition Task Force</td>
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</table>
Evaluation

Evaluation of the internal communications plan relative to the merger or acquisition will be conducted both during and after the transaction. The following times and evaluation methods will be used. It is worth noting that the schedule outlined below is based on a 12 month merger completion schedule.

- Implementation Report: Two months after announcement
- Progress Report: Six months after announcement and six months before close of transaction, known as the “midpoint” of the communications plan
- Final Evaluation: Three months after close of transaction

The implementation plan will focus primarily on the tactics related to the establishment of companywide and departmental meetings. It will also take into account whether or not the building blocks are in place for later elements of the plan, including the development of a newsletter template and construction of talking points. The progress report will evaluate the measures that have taken place between the announcement of the merger and the midpoint, roughly six months after the announcement. This will provide ample time for at least one issue of the newsletter to be published, representing written communication, and multiple departmental meetings to occur, representing verbal/interpersonal communication. Lastly, the final evaluation will be conducted three months after the close of the transaction and be based on the entire catalog of information collected or created during the merger, such as surveys, video messages, newsletter article, and

Several elements of the plan can be deemed a success in terms of exposure to the given messages, including those found in the written newsletter and expressed during companywide
and departmental meetings. For example, the results focused on reaching a certain percentage of employees can be obtained directly through check-in sheet at the doors of in-person meetings and also captured via online demographic information collected via web-viewing. This information will be captured by members of the merger/acquisition task force throughout the various stages of the transaction and kept on file for use during the construction of the final evaluation.

To determine how well individual plan tactics resonated with employees, focus groups led by members of the merger/acquisition task force will be held throughout the organization. These groups will be comprised of the same groups of 6-10 employees from related job functions, such as accounting/finance or sales, which were formed as part of the plan tactic to encourage employee dialogue. This will allow for the participants in each specific group to share a common ground from which they can share their feedback on how the plan tactics affected them and their job roles. Information will be collected in a confidential format to encourage open discussion and to prevent any negative repercussions on any employee that voices a concern or contradictory viewpoint. No identifying information will be tied to any of the comments provided, and the member of the merger/acquisition team will be bound by the confidentiality of his or her position and therefore not reveal any identifying information about the contributors.

Results of the final evaluation report will be distributed to members of senior leadership that played an active role in the merger or acquisition. Although the information contained within the evaluation will be specific to the transaction, the commentary offered on the overall success or failure of specific communications tactics can be utilized by these individuals in the creation of future communications initiatives or used as a method of professional development meant to improve personal communication abilities.
Recommendations for Future Research

The aforementioned goals, objectives, strategies, and tactics of an internal communications plan were constructed based on the review of related research and surveys completed by those affected by a merger or acquisition. Being that mergers or acquisitions are an increasingly popular option for companies looking to maintain their profitable status, this type of plan should be included in the corporate communications strategy for any large corporation. A valuable inclusion in future research would be feedback based on an interview with a communications professional presently working through this type of transaction. This individual would have a unique, first-hand perspective that could validate the information contained within the plan and also provide additional insight to the elements that are lacking. Although helpful, this type of information is often difficult to obtain due to the confidentiality agreements that bind professionals in these positions. However, this type of communication would be helpful to bring another dimension to the study and include the perspective of someone in a transformative role within this type of organization.
Outside Evaluations

Evaluation for Alicia Mort

Creative Project Evaluator: Mallory Trusty, PhD

Brief discussion of evaluator’s credentials (knowledge and experience of the subject area)

The reviewer holds a BA in Psychology and MS in Human Resource Management from Purdue University. While there, Mallory served as a Research Assistant for the Psychology department, and as a Graduate Teaching Assistant, teaching Intercultural Communication and English as a Second Language. Trust also holds a PhD in Global Leadership and Organizational Development. Her dissertation work explored Leader Support Behaviors that impact follower turnover intentions within global organizations. Trusty has over 6 years of experience working in Human Resources. Additionally, she serves as an Adjunct Professor for various undergraduate Business courses.

Relationship to the student and subject matter

Trusty and Mort currently work for the same organization, wherein Mort is employed as a Marketing Manager and is responsible for all aspects of Corporate Communications including the composition of marketing collateral, and a variety of projects and messaging for internal and external employees, independent distributors, customers, and industry professionals. Mort brings to the position over 8 years of marketing experience in both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations. The quality of her work is impeccable and she brings a degree of sophistication and professionalism to the role that is unsurpassed.
**Evaluation of the topic as appropriate for the creative endeavor**

This project was written for substance, structure, and form. The introduction provides a clear and concise summary of the project, research goals, and practical application of the project. I would encourage the inclusion of empirical work in support of the use of Relationship Management Theory.

**Evaluation of the student’s approach**

The author provides a unique approach to a relevant professional problem, with practical implications for scholars and industry professionals. The author does a great job explaining how the project contributes to the existing body of knowledge in the fields of communication, organizational behavior and human resources, and provides excellent recommendations for future research as well as an implementation strategy for organizations preparing for, or going through a merger or acquisition.

**Evaluation of the body of the project: Quality, Depth of Treatment, Coverage**

Mort presents a compelling argument regarding the generalizability of her project, citing the prevalence of mergers and acquisitions in the competitive, global landscape of the 21st century. Overall, the content is appropriate for this level of academic writing; the project outline is well-organized, coherent and written in a style that is academic in nature, but appropriate for a practitioner audience.

**Evaluation of the student’s work as contributing to the field (e.g., body of knowledge)**

It is my opinion that her project in its entirety would be of great service to any organization traversing through the difficult nuances of a successful merger or acquisition.
Evaluation for Alicia Mort

Creative Project Evaluator: Susan Alexander

Brief discussion of evaluator’s credentials (knowledge and experience of the subject area)

The company I have worked at for 20 years is going through a merger. I have worked in Corporate Communications for the past five years, and also serve as a member of the integration communications team. This gives me exposure to the activities that my company is involved in and has developed in response to the merger. Prior to my Corporate Communications job, I was in the Legal department for 15 years. I have also worked with our Regulatory Affairs department.

Relationship to the student and subject matter

I have known Alicia for a number of years, and for some of that time we worked together. She was in the Marketing Communications area while I worked in Legal. As a result, we would frequently be involved in the same projects.

I work for a company that is currently going through an acquisition/merger. This gives me the perspective to understand the subject matter of this paper. As I described in the answer above, I also am a member of the integrations communications team.

Evaluation of the topic as appropriate for the creative endeavor

I think this is a great topic to explore. I doubt that there has been much research regarding communications during a merge, particularly with employees. This is important to consider since employees are deeply impacted by mergers. To me, communications is vital to maintaining employee morale during a very stressful time.
Evaluation of the student’s approach

It is very beneficial that Alicia chose not only to use already-available materials for her research, but communicated with individuals who are living through an acquisition/merge daily in their work lives. Research can run the risk of being dated, so having employee feedback gives a real-world applicability to the study. The questions she chose were good in that they captured a lot of the concerns employees may have. This type of information is important to creating a plan that would be appropriate for a variety of different companies.

Evaluation of the body of the project: Quality, Depth of Treatment, Coverage

a. Quality

This project is concise and well-written. It gets the point across without belaboring any point too excessively and is easy to understand. The research and conclusions demonstrate Alicia’s understanding of the subject matter. It also shows that she understands what it can be like to work through a merger, as she was employed by a company involved in this before choosing to move on to another job. It is clear that she has experience in public relations instead of just in marketing, which was her focus when we worked together.

b. Depth of Treatment and Coverage

I work with the integration communications team at my company. Alicia has covered well the issues we have encountered. Her survey questions capture a lot of the topics we covered in our own strategy development. The level with which she explored the questions is appropriate.
Evaluation of the student’s work as contributing to the field (e.g., body of knowledge)

Alicia's work definitely moves the discussion forward. She has been able to communicate with people “living” the process and has woven their opinions and perceptions into her work.
References


