I recently wrapped up a consulting engagement helping a national bank manage the organizational changes post-close of an M&A deal.  Going into the engagement, I expected culture mismatch to be the most significant “people” related challenge to integrating the two banks.

Do a google search on mergers and acquisitions and you can find countless stories of failed M&As as a result of culture misalignment. Examples such as Time Warner/AOL and Compaq and HP are high profile examples of mergers that failed to meet the mark.

Certainly, on this engagement, integrating the cultures of two financial institutions was a key component to the success of the integration.

However, once I was on the ground, it became apparent to me that *there were other not-so-obvious factors that posed a risk to a successful integration.*  Those risks were change saturation, declining employee engagement and lack of a solid plan to integrate people.  I’ll cover each of these challenges in a series of separate blog posts since they are meaty topics. For this post, I’m going to discuss how leaders can minimize the risk of overwhelming their employees with too much change.

***What is change saturation?***

Each of us has a threshold for how much change we can handle in our personal and professional lives.  *Change saturation happens when the amount of change we experience exceeds the capacity that we can handle.*Either the number of changes in our lives and work become too great or the level of disruption from a change(s) is overwhelming.  When employees feel like the volume of change to their work is too much they become disengaged from their jobs and outright resist the change.

***Signs that my team is suffering from change saturation:***

* **Disengagement**- *Feeling overwhelmed by change leads to burn-out, stress and anxiety*.  This triggers “fight or flight” syndrome in your employees. Some will vocalize their frustration and you’ll hear “noise in the system” and some employees just check out and become disengaged. Leaders are not immune to change fatigue, so watch for leader disengagement. Signs of disengagement include not coming late to or missing project meetings, absenteeism, lack of initiative, running out the door at end of the work day, apathy or silence.
* **Declining work quality**- There are only so many hours in a day to do work.  When employees are juggling their normal work plus additional work from multiple projects, they fall behind.  If you observe lower work quality or chronic delays in completing work, you may be at risk.
* **Employee turnover**- When employees don’t have a sense for when the changes will slow down to a manageable pace and the organization returns to steady state, they reach a breakpoint and perceive that the grass is greener on the other side.  Be on the lookout for indications that your top performers are looking for the exit door.

As a leader it’s important that you encourage two-way open communication with your employee so that you can anticipate when they’re feeling overwhelmed and can coach them.

***What can I do to prevent this from happening?***

* **Manage portfolio of change**- Create change journey heat maps to manage the portfolio of integration changes impacting a team or department.
  + **Step 1: Create a comprehensive list of all of the integration and non-integration related projects** that impact employees. Then drill down a bit further and and collect the individual milestones that will impact employees.  Examples of project milestones include go-live with new technology, transition to a new leader, roll-out of a new policy, physical office move, etc.
  + **Step 2: Put those milestones on a timeline** so that you have an idea of the timing of the milestone.
  + **Step 3: Assess the impact level (high, medium, low) of the milestone** to the employee looking at how much will change to their processes, technology and organization. Some examples of factors that you could use to evaluate level of impact include, number of people impacted, whether a new skill set is required, amount of change in the way work gets done, whether it requires new system to get work done etc.

Now that you have the timing and impact of the change to the workgroup, you’ll have a better sense for when your team is at risk of being tipped over with change.

* **Replan the integration efforts**- Consider *shifting integration milestone dates to minimize the saturation risk*. Creating a change journey map will help you establish the business case to move milestone dates.  Explore the possibility of obtaining additional resources during peak periods (e.g. Go-Live dates, training, etc.) so that work doesn’t pile up while people are out at training or transitioning to a new system post go-live.
* **Consistent communication**
  + **Initiate 1:1 check-ins with your staff**to see how they’re managing their regular work plus additional work required by projects.
  + **Offer to help them re-prioritize meetings and activities.**
  + **Provide them with air-cover or help them find a backfill resource** if they need to step away from a work initiative or stop participating in other work meetings so that they can get ready for the changes that are coming.
  + **Establish a cadence of regular updates** to your team about the change initiatives. Explain what’s happening, when and the benefits and what the impact will be to them.  Reinforce the negative outcome to the organization and workforce if the company had not gone through with the integration.
  + **Solicit their feedback**- they may have creative solutions. I find that if employees know well enough in advance about the project and how it will impact them, they can plan their work out and adjust accordingly.

Minimizing the risk of change saturation and managing change effectively during an integration requires proactive planning and a solid methodology. In my next blog post, I will discuss a second risk to integration success- disengaged employees and what leaders can do to keep employees engaged throughout the integration process.