

# Assignment

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# Merging three student democracies: handling the opposition

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# 1 Introduction

The three University Colleges (UCs) Westerdals, the Norwegian School of Information Technology (NITH), and the Nordic Institute of Stage and Studio (NISS) are subject to a merger forced upon them by their common owner. The new UC, Westerdals Oslo ACT, will consist of five different faculties, with varying numbers of students and study programmes.

As a natural consequence, the three UCs's student democracies (SDs) need to be merged in a fashion that accounts for inclusion of all faculties and the distribution of students, maintains the practices that already work well for the existing SDs, and establishes a cross-faculty culture despite the faculties not being colocated in the first years after the merger.

This introduces several changes of not only practical nature, but also cultural, which are often the most difficult to deal with (Luftman, 2009, p. 12495).

This article first provides the background for the change effort, before taking a cursory look at important literature in the fields of *change management* and *merging organisations like the student democracy* based on a literature search, with special regard to *ethical issues* one must expect to face in the opposition against the change effort.

Then, using (Kotter, 1995) as a framework, it demonstrates a practical plan, as suggested in (Pettigrew, Woodman & Cameron, 2001, 4), for merging the three student democracies and how the opposition against the change effort will be handled.

Finally, the article concludes by contextualising this particular merger, points out the key ways of handling the opposition in this particular case, and suggests a direction for further research on the field of handling opposition in a change effort involving mergers.

## 2 Key expected issues for the change effort

The change effort of merging the SDs has a few different stakeholders:

- Of course, the students make up the primary stakeholder group, as the SD will be their primary way of getting things done at the UC and communicate with the UC's management.
- The UC's management will primarily communicate and negotiate with the students represented by the executive committee of the SD.
- Because of the nature of a UC, the UC's marketing department will benefit greatly from being able to boast a good and inclusive student community across faculties, which can easiest be achieved through a functional SD. This will, in turn, quite possibly affect prospective students to apply.

One key issue is that only the former NITH already has an active student community rooted in the SD. This means that the SD's budget will naturally be skewed towards the Faculty of Technology in the first period while a culture for collaborating across faculties is established. The only notable exception to this is a "party committee" comprising only a few students at the former Westerdals.

Another key issue is that neither existing governance takes into account the possibility of the SD in its entirety not being colocated. This introduces a whole class of practical concerns: for instance, no faculty is interested in local issues at other faculties such as missing mirrors or broken internet connections, which are common issues raised in the existing SDs. Further, it is impractical to represent all students at a single location more often than every couple of months, but a fast flow of communication regarding local issues is imperative to the function of the SD.

A final key issue is the student body's identification with the UCs they had applied to: there was already opposition to the merger and identifying with the UC's new name and profile, let alone feeling an affiliation with the other schools, which had previously been considered *competition* by many.

Merging the SDs in a manner inclusive and efficient for everyone, and additionally speeding up processes that had already been slow where possible, will require a complete restructuring of the existing organisation into a new, single organisation with different branches. For example, communication between faculties will be a big issue not previously addressed by the existing SDs. This means:

- redefining existing roles,
- introducing new roles, and
- removing existing roles that would impede the new SD from working optimally.

Luftman (2009, p. 1232) states that:

One of the best examples of how IT can change the way a business operates is found in the concept of *disintermediation*.

Luftman specifically considers IT, but disintermediation (the removal a "middle man" in a process which is no longer required) is sure to be part of the change process, but only intended to empower the different positions. While this is sure to affect individuals, they must be provided with a way to clearly see that while their current positions are at stake, they will still be able to bring value to the new organisation in the same manner with altered roles and still bring great value to the new SD if only they adapt to the change.

### 3 Literature review

Having established the background for the change effort, it becomes apparent that the areas of *change management* and *merging organisations like the student democracy* with attention to handling opposition rooted in ethical grounds will be imperative to the success of the change effort.

Pettigrew et al. (2001, 4) performs a thorough literature review of the 44th edition of the *Academy of Management Journal*, pointing out challenges for future research regarding organisational change. In particular, it identifies that very few articles focused on linking scholarship and practise, linking process to outcome, and international comparative research. We

will see that these areas have received some attention in later years, but that we still have a ways to go.

O'Mahoney and Markham (2013) thoroughly considers ethics of management consultancy and change efforts from a consultancy perspective, and raises several key issues concerning how a consultant should introduce and manage projects– but does not consider change efforts initiated from within the organisation, although many parallels can be drawn.

Hargie (2011) focuses communication, which is of course a key aspect of organisational transformation and handling of opposition, but not on the overarching processes. However, the contribution is indeed important to the field, and should be acknowledged.

Luftman (2009) considers the importance of IT in introducing change in an organisation, and how the IT department must obtain a somewhat complete perspective of the organisation before committing to introducing change. On a related note, (Joseph, Ang, Chang & Slaughter, 2010, 2) considers the importance of soft skills in IT personnel, exactly due to the power Luftman presents that IT has over organisational processes. (Luftman, 2009) also considers general change management, and in particular, the absolutely imperative importance of communication.

Luftman (2009) is backed up by (Kotter, 1995), which considers eight common errors commonly made when introducing a change effort in an organisation.

Peng, Liu and Tao (2009) considers the motives behind, characteristics of, and goals of organisational change, and clearly states that organisational development is a dynamic and continuous process. This article concludes with several modes of change.

Yeh-Yin Lin and Wei (2006, 1) explicitly considers the role of business ethics in merger and acquisition success in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, providing an important contribution in this area.

Finally, (Mcgee, 2004) considers the other side, emphasising ethics of handling the resistance to the change with regard to several tactics used defensively against change efforts.

## 4 Change plan

Opposition rooted in both individuals's fear for their own positions, trouble with feeling any affiliation to the new SD in the short term, as well as ethical concerns from the student body at large and the representatives in the SD must therefore be expected. In particular, as found by (Yeh-Yin Lin & Wei, 2006, 1), ethical areas that will need to be addressed explicitly include *employment security* (even though "employment" is possibly the wrong term in this case), *justice* in the form of an appraisal system, and *caring practises* both during and after the initial change effort. Additionally, (Mcgee, 2004, p. 8) considers the possibility of the merger *failing* – this must certainly be considered in the process.

Using the eight steps to transforming an organisation from Kotter's 1995 article 'Leading change: why transformation efforts fail' as a basic framework, this chapter presents an action plan for conducting the transformation. This section, therefore, naturally leans heavily on the matter discussed in this article.

### 4.1 Establishing a sense of urgency

The sense of urgency is to some extent already established because of the merger, but the importance of creating a functional and flourishing student community may still be lost. The guiding coalition discussed in the next subsection will need to communicate this sense of urgency to both the student body as a whole, and the UC's management to foster productive collaboration.

This must be done by exposing problems with the status quo, which can for example be done as exemplified in (Kotter, 1995) by performing a satisfaction survey and making the findings public. This should encourage both the UC's management and the student body to take action.

As previously mentioned, a key issue with the status quo is the distribution of students across the faculties, and how the SD's budget is only focused towards one of the five faculties. In order to maintain a fair and inclusive student community and democracy, it is important to form a guiding coalition that can work towards these factors.

## 4.2 Forming a powerful guiding coalition

As seen in the previous subsection, a powerful guiding coalition with the means to act on the change initiative comprising "high-profile" students experienced with the existing student democracy, representing all faculties to as great an extent as possible, must be established if the interest of the student body is to be kept in focus as the change progresses.

The guiding (student) coalition must be in close contact with the UC's management to keep the process aligned with the UC's strategy. Further, this student coalition must, of course, communicate regularly with the students while it is working.

The most important work completed by the coalition will be to create and establish a vision, and empower others to act on the vision – in addition to maintaining the sense of urgency and focusing on creating short-term wins with the long-term goal in mind to convert the opposition.

## 4.3 Creating a vision

Establishing a vision that has the student body's interests in mind while still working with the UC's management in a realistic fashion is imperative to the change effort's success.

An important factor to consider is that the vision must be continuously iterated upon as the change effort progresses, as opposed to leaving it as a static statement that will be ignored and forgotten; clearly, the guiding coalition will not have all the answers from the beginning of the effort.

As we know that some of the resistance towards the change effort will be rooted in ethics, it is important the effort has transparency in this area in mind from the very beginning, starting with the vision. This way, it will become possible to involve rather than alienate the opposing forces concerned about ethics in the newly formed organisation.

The vision will be the starting point for forming a strategy, which (if communicated transparently and well) will allow other parts of the organisation to act on the change in a productive manner. Failing to establish a clear and flexible vision (and in turn, strategy) will only let the opposition gather forces, as the end goal will be lost from sight (Luftman, 2009), (Peng



et al., 2009).

## **4.4 Communicating the vision**

Kotter (1995) establishes that communicating the vision clearly and regularly to all affected parts of the organisation is imperative to prevent the change opposition from gathering forces against something unknown and new which threatens their positions. The guiding coalition must therefore establish routines for communicating the vision to all students in all faculties, as well as to the UC's management.

Clear and regular communication of the vision will also be important in demonstrating short-term wins, as we will see later: when many know of the effort, it becomes easy to tie small victories to the long-term strategy.

The newly merged UC already suffers from having no way for the students to communicate across faculties, so the guiding coalition must create a way to transparently make the status of the efforts (as well as short-term wins) available to the students and other stakeholders. An effective strategy can be to build an interactive and actually useful website for the SD. This website should focus on not only providing static data, but make progress transparent. This changes the very core of the SD, as there will suddenly be an IT department to manage. This will introduce a whole class of new considerations as it changes the entire core of the organisation (Luftman, 2009), especially if the coalition chooses to use external workforce (O'Mahoney & Markham, 2013). In turn, this system can be used to demonstrate short-term wins, as will be discussed later.

## **4.5 Empowering others to act on the vision**

While the guiding coalition does its work establishing the new democracy and organisation, the SD must, of course, continue to exist. It is therefore paramount that others are empowered to act on the change effort while it progresses, to ensure that the opposition does not gather forces against something that cannot be used.

Members of former committees and groups from the separate SDs must be involved in the work and continue to maintain the existing SD as needed, and should at all costs not be

alienated by the guiding coalition as this will likely lead to them joining the opposition (Kotter, 1995). Instead, they should be made explicitly aware of the planned and completed short-term wins discussed in the next subsection.

A concrete measure the guiding coalition should take here is to make the by-laws defining the SD more flexible by reducing the time between meetings empowered to change the by-laws and other guiding documents from one to one half year. This will enable the SD to modify itself as it sees fit, and encourage a healthy communication between the guiding coalition and the student body.

## 4.6 Planning for and creating short-term wins

As mentioned previously in this section, it is important to plan for and create short-term wins to win the opposition over little by little (Kotter, 1995). Once presented with facts about how the change positively impacts the SD, the opposition should be convertible to instead join the change effort. This will be the first important step towards converting key, high profile members of the opposition to change advocates, or *champions* (Luftman, 2009).

Kotter notes that showing results within 12–24 months is imperative. It follows, then, that the change coalition cannot spend too long planning the merger of the SDs: it must be put into action piece by piece and demonstrate that it is more efficient than the status quo.

Important short-term wins in this context may be that issues regarding single faculties are dealt with quicker than before while still being communicated well into the SD spanning all faculties, or that issues raised in meetings will be more relevant to the participants (and therefore shorter): students from one campus are not interested in broken mirrors or weak internet connections at other faculties, but need to be involved with the status quo. A final example is that the executive committee, which represents the SD between meetings, will be able to represent all faculties in a better fashion.

Planning for, creating, and demonstrating these short-term wins will boost the credibility of the change, while keeping the end goal of the change effort in sight (Kotter, 1995).

## 4.7 Consolidating improvements and producing still more change

While focusing on short-term wins and consolidating their positive effects on the SD, more change must be produced continuously. Empowering the SD to change itself as it needs to, while simultaneously restricting it from going back to the status quo, will be of high importance. This can be done through utilising the change "champions" who advocate the change effort within the organisation.

Again, empowering biannual meetings to change the SD's by-laws and leading documents is a concrete measure that must be taken by the change coalition, as this is the only way to allow the SD to take change into its own hands and become an organisation of change champions rather than resistance (Luftman, 2009, p. 12395).

## 4.8 Institutionalising new approaches

[...] change sticks when it becomes "the way we do things around here", when it seeps into the bloodstream of the corporate body.

(Kotter, 1995, p. 9)

While the change coalition will be in the fortunate position of being able to "force" the democracy into working as the coalition intends from the beginning due to by-laws and routines effective from the very beginning of the actual change effort, resistance must naturally still be handled.

At the final stages of the initial change effort towards a merged and inclusive SD, techniques like negotiation, coercion, and even manipulation or cooptation may be required to convert the remaining resistance to join the effort.

# 5 Conclusion and further research

Somewhat in the manner suggested by (Pettigrew et al., 2001, 4)'s extensive review of the journal in which it was published, this article has attempted to deliver "how to" knowledge

in the field of merging organisations. Yet, this is only one context: one key issue is that there are no paid positions in the student democracy, which certainly will have an effect on the change. Further, no one student is (normally) a part of the student democracy for more than three (or at an absolute high, five) years, which means that ownership will not be as present as in other organisations. This also likely means that a cultural change is far less difficult than it would have been in an organisation where the upper management is well defined and established, and there is already established a "way we do things around here".

The change will be forced upon the students whether they want to be a part of it or not, and the resistance to the organisational change will almost always be rooted in fear of being underrepresented or losing power, which is of course not the intention of the change effort. The best way by far to limit paranoia regarding the change effort is to expose the effort through a clearly defined and regularly updated vision, and be open about all parts of the effort in a way that continuously reaches all stakeholders.

(Pettigrew et al., 2001, 4) identified several key research areas, and these still seem to require attention. In addition, it seems that the ethics concerning failed mergers and acquisitions are still a gap in the current literature.

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