

Using RELATIONSHIP AWARENESS to Ease Culture Clash

It has been estimated that in the last year, there were over 7,000 mergers of US firms, with the total value of those deals estimated at \$1.2 trillion. Yet, according to various studies, anywhere from half to three-quarters of these mergers will fail to meet the objectives that made them seem like a good idea in the first place.

The problem? Failure to merge the workforces successfully, especially in areas such as cultural understanding and communication. The solution? Among other things, as Marks and Mirvis delineate in *Joining Forces: Making One Plus One Equal Three in Mergers, Acquisitions and Alliances*, systematically learning about and respecting pre-merger cultures.

There are lessons to be learned from one New Zealand organization's efforts to promote a new organizational culture, following its merging of two previously competitive companies. The new company wanted to make increased use of teams, operate with a commitment to continuous improvement, provide exceptional customer service, and optimize safety. The goal: to increase effectiveness and competitiveness.

Like most New Zealand companies in its industry, this forest-products-based company has a workforce that is predominantly Maori, while the company is managed primarily by members of the majority population, whose ancestry is European.

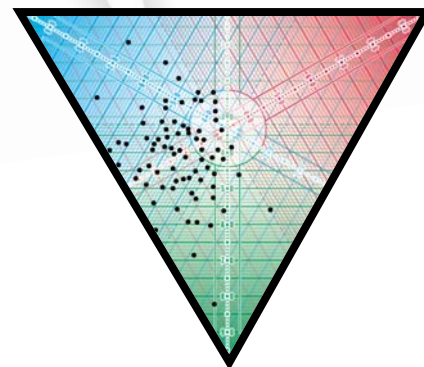
The Maori, who are New Zealand's indigenous people, now comprise approximately 15% of the country's population. As New Zealand's non-Maori populations became the majority, the Maori culture was largely suppressed, except to the extent that its customs and rituals could contribute to the success of New Zealand's tourism industry. However, since the 1980s, Maori have played a more active role in society, and the non-Maori population has gained a better appreciation of Maori culture and related issues.

The company launched a two-day staff development program to support the desired organizational change. The program incorporated Relationship Awareness,[™] with the Strength Deployment Inventory[®] being completed and debriefed on the second day. It was clear that the insights gained from the SDI helped everyone—employer

and employee—see where they “fit”. The program helped build a commitment to team goals, while strengthening the skills that the employees needed to examine and improve work practices.

In addition to these results, there was an unanticipated discovery—that the SDI scores of the Maori participants (who represent the majority of the company's workforce) were distinctively grouped in one area of the triangle, as shown below:

- ▼ 54% were Cautious-Supporting (Blue-Green)
- ▼ 19% were Altruistic-Nurturing (Blue)
- ▼ 20% had scores in the Hub (Flexible-Cohering)
- ▼ The balance were Analytic-Autonomizing (Green)



These results were similar to those I had recently seen in another setting. This led me to investigate the reasons why this might be so, and what, if any, were the implications.

Interviews, informal conversations and library research yielded some valuable and interesting information.

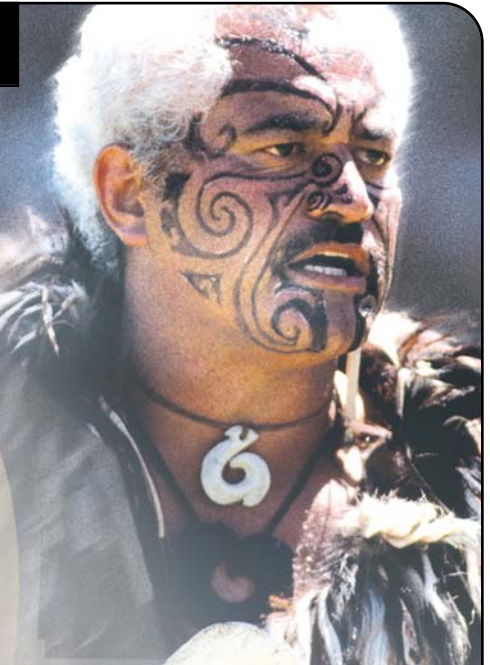
"Detail of Maori Men Putting Finishing Touches on Canoe."
Corbis/Neil Rabinowitz © 1990

Contemporary Maori culture owes much to its traditional values, in particular:

- ▼ Respect for people.
- ▼ Respect for community, collective responsibility and kinship.
- ▼ Respect for materials, and especially land.

Identification of these values highlights the importance of utilizing certain complementary management practices, including the following:

- ▼ Letting employees know what is going on and why.
- ▼ Providing recognition for special expertise.
- ▼ Demonstrating respect for and knowledge of Maori culture.



Contemporary Maori Values

- ▼ Respect for materials—In the Maori culture, everything has “mauri”, i.e., a life force.
- ▼ Respect for people—We all need each other.
- ▼ Each person is to be treated with respect.
- ▼ Respect for community—People have collective responsibility, kinship.

Features of a Rewarding Environment for the Cautious-Supporting (Blue-Green) Motivational Value System

- ▼ Environment that respects individuals, fairness, and resources.
- ▼ Opportunities to encourage growth and bring forth the best in others.
- ▼ Environment that affirms and develops self-sufficiency in self and others.

It follows that Maori employees are likely to be most comfortable and productive in a Cautious-Supporting (Blue-Green) workplace environment—one that promotes, among other things, respect for individuals, fairness and resources; one that creates opportunities that will encourage growth, independence and “bringing out the best” in others. In such an environment, self-managed teams are likely to flourish, through their capacity to nurture the growth of other people’s self-reliance. Building such an environment can be a challenging task, but in this New Zealand company, it is being achieved by a number of initiatives such as:

- ▼ Implementing a training program that focuses on putting into practice the company’s vision, core values and core business strategies.
- ▼ Requiring all company employees (including Senior Management) to attend a one-day Maori Awareness course, designed specifically to teach a better appreciation of Maori culture.
- ▼ Seeking international recognition of its company policies and practices with regard to New Zealand’s indigenous people ...the Maori!
- ▼ Promoting the development of self-managed work teams.

It is clear from this example that systematically learning about and respecting the cultures of others should be a key part of any major organizational change such as a merger, takeover, or acquisition. The tools of Relationship Awareness can be used to good effect in this process. Relationship Awareness is not only a tool to help individuals achieve more productive interpersonal relationships, but also contributes to the insights and understandings that are pre-requisites for a healthy organization operating in a global economy.

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