DTP VIEWS

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Mergers – conquering the mountain is only half the challenge

– Andy Roskell Director, DTP

For those who have made it to the top of Mount Everest, there's a popular saying: reaching the summit is only half of the journey. Only when you have made it safely back to base camp can you truly claim your expedition has been a success.

In some respects a similar principle applies to housing associations embarking on the sometimes difficult journey towards a merger. (There's probably slightly less risk of frostbite, however, and I still haven't quite worked out what the merger equivalent of the 'Death Zone' is!)

In a merger situation, the completion of financial and legal due diligence, and meeting the requirements of the regulator, are in some respects the equivalent of reaching the top of the mountain. But bringing together two different cultures into one new organisation is the next, but equally, important leg of the journey. You can only call your merger a success if you achieve this crucial objective.

Cultural due diligence should in many ways be given as much priority as the other kinds undertaken as part of the merger process. In some respects it's less structured than the financial and legal varieties. It's easier to apply hard and fast rules or put numbers on your assessment, but it remains vital.

Crucially, you cannot tolerate the retention of different cultures. The newly merged organisation must quickly establish itself as a cohesive business with a single culture. And it must be a new and distinct culture.

So where might there be a clash of cultures? One we often come across centres on organisational structure. You might come across a business which is quite traditional, with quite a hierarchical structure and tightly defined roles. The merger partner, on the other hand, might be a flatter, more fluid type of organisation. It's not impossible to overcome these differences as long as you make a statement of intent at the highest level of what you want the new organisation to look like. A successful new 'hybrid' culture depends on clear direction from the outset about how things are going to be.

Difficulties often arise where there is sensitivity about the qualities which each party is bringing to the merger. People can be a little precious about what's good about their business and be reluctant to see its shortcomings. I have come across instances where people have viewed the characteristics of other organisations as weaknesses, while similar traits in their own business are viewed as strengths.

The trick is to try to work together to create something that is fit for purpose for your new shared future – rather than to dwell on what worked or didn't work for the separate organisations. It's about starting with a clean sheet of paper and creating something which is hopefully greater than the sum of its parts. Ultimately, the success of any merger stands or falls on the extent to which the new culture prevails. Leadership from the top has to define this and expect complete commitment to certain behaviours – from top to bottom. In my experience this offers the best way to create a positive new environment.

Foot dragging and obfuscation by some individuals or groups can be a similar barrier to progress. People can resist change and decide to simply carry on as they did before; sometimes refusing to fully engage with people from the partner business.

While it's important to listen carefully to the different views within an organisation and to consider sensible suggestions, you cannot tolerate opposition to change simply because it is seen as too difficult. Staff need to know from the outset that the new organisation is going to be different – it will not be business as usual. However difficult it is to overcome this opposition, it's vital for the whole business that you continue to drive through improvements which will help you operate more effectively.

That is ultimately the end goal of any merger proposals – the base camp if you like, where the air is less thin and you can breathe a little easier!

The desire to be more effective and to deliver better value for money remains the ultimate driver for mergers. The seismic events of last summer, where we saw the government call time on above inflation rent increases, haven't changed that. From what we are seeing, there do seem to be more preliminary talks taking place about potential mergers as a result. In a lot of cases, potential partners are walking away at this early stage and saying it's not for us – but if anything the events of last summer seem to be increasing general interest in the idea of a merger.

The changed landscape may make proving the business case harder – but it hasn't altered the basic premise that housing associations can often be better together than they are apart. There are still efficiencies which can be achieved – even if the value for money wins aren't as great as they once were. Getting to the summit, and back down again safely, may look a little more daunting in this new era – but it's still worth the effort!