

Reducing Conflict 40 We Versus They

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



Whenever two groups are trying to work together you can often hear “we versus they” conversations.

In this article, I use the example of mergers and acquisitions, but the phenomenon applies to all situations with different groups.

After announcing a merger or acquisition, there is a period of integration while the cultures reach a new equilibrium. During this process, it is common to hear a lot of “we versus they” language coming from both groups.

If not addressed, this parochial thinking process can go on for a long time. The rhetoric undermines the benefits of the combined entity. This article highlights some ideas on how to move from a “we/they” point of view and get more quickly to “us.”

Operating as Separate Entities

Sometimes there is a setup where both organizations are supposed to go on as if they were still separate entities. For example, when Amazon acquired Zappos they allowed Zappos to operate as if the acquisition had not occurred. The goal was for less disruption.

That logic may hold for a while, but eventually, the benefits of operating efficiently together will take the upper hand. Sooner or later, people are going to have to work as a team and trust one another.

Lack of Trust

In the majority of cases, the integration is a rocky process because trust is low from the start. Getting groups to work together with one common set of processes is a journey that can take years to accomplish.

On paper, the plan usually calls for full integration in a couple of months. In reality, you can hear the “we versus they” logic for several years after the announcement.

Geographic Complications

Geographic separation tends to exacerbate the situation. For example, you would hear, “**We** always did it this way, but **they** will not let us do it.” For multinational organizations, the problem is a constant source of irritation.

Why Does it Happen

What gives rise to we/they thinking? I believe it is because people naturally fear change and try to make the inevitable changes impact the other group. Both groups feel they have been taken over or greatly inconvenienced by the need to "do it their way."

People dig in their heels and try to subvert the changes. That attitude is tantamount to sabotage. It can sink all efforts to create the kind of efficient, homogeneous entity that the planners intended.

Starting Over

One method is to toss out the procedures for each entity. Invent joint processes that serve both organizations from the ground up. That process sounds like a fair one until you get into it. Realize that you are fighting both groups on each and every process change. It is still "we versus they" but with a different flavor.

Deflecting Energy from Goals

The most significant issue with the "we versus they" attitude is that it siphons off energy away from the main goals. Instead, people spend significant time and resources arguing over the nits of process details. The customer is left wondering what happened to the good old level of service that was the norm before the merger.

How to Avoid the Problem

What steps can leaders take to eliminate "we versus they" and get to "us" more quickly? One method is to transplant enough people from one entity to the other that it becomes difficult to tell who are "we" and who are "they." That process is not always a popular one, but it does lead to a faster integration of the populations. It also enhances bench strength due to cross-training.

Another Way to Fix

One cure to the "we versus they" feeling is if another larger entity comes along and gobbles up the merged group. They are now fighting off a different "they" and quickly become the "we" together. Let me explain that a bit more so it is clear. You have the merger of A & B. There is significant angst because both groups feel taken over. They are trying to resolve their differences when Group C buys out the sum of A & B. Now as if by magic, the merged A & B get along great and work to fend off the effects of the big bad C Group.

Use Better Language

One effective and inexpensive way to address the problem is for the leaders to always model the use of integrated language. They need to coach those who use oppositional language to change their pattern of speech. Replace "them" with "us" whenever possible and do not support discussions that pit one side versus the other.

Having both groups meet together to chart a mutual shared purpose and strategy often goes a long way toward getting to "us." When people put significant energy into crafting a collaborative vision, they tend to become closer as a result.

If both leaders of the prior entities are still on board heading up the combined unit, it helps to have them swap positions. That process adds to the knowledge base for bench strength and eliminates parochial thinking at the top.

In a merger or acquisition, it is wise to tackle the problem of "we/they" thinking with a conscious strategy. If not, the journey to full integration could be a long and painful one.

Bob Whipple is CEO of Leadergrow, Inc. an organization dedicated to growing leaders. He is author of the following books: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*