THE WAKE-UP CALL

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MIA: Missing-in-Action and Why People Are Not Numbers. Difficulties During the Integration of Companies in Merger Processes

By Christian Rook

A few years ago, in my role as CEO EMEA of a global automation company in the semiconductor industry, I was responsible for the integration of a competitor after their acquisition. At the time, we were the third-largest FAB automation company worldwide and acquired the second-largest. It was a clear strategic move that made us the global market leader. The merger was cleanly structured, the project plans professionally set up, and the systems largely integrated.

But then I received a call that has stayed with me to this day, and which I would like to share here.

An employee from the acquired company contacted me. I didn't know him at the time – he had been working from home in Bavaria for many years, in customer service. He asked me a simple, almost banal question:

"Mr. Rook, who's going to sign my travel expense report now? All of my supervisors were laid off last week."

As part of the integration, it had been decided to offer termination agreements to the middle management of the former competitor, and most of them had accepted.

So the employee who called me was left behind. No one had offered him a contract. No one had dismissed him. No one had spoken to him or informed him. Neither the leadership of the old company nor we had reached out.

I searched for his name everywhere – in the employee databases used for the integration in Germany, Europe, the U.S. Nothing. He wasn't registered in any system. Not on any list, not in any org chart, not assigned to any cost center in SAP. He was virtually nonexistent. But in reality, he was there. Working. Loyal.

"Have you received your last salary?" I asked.

"Yes, I still receive my salary on time. Just from the new company now. But I'm asking about my travel expense reports…"

It wasn't clear to him – unfortunately – that this was about more than just reimbursements. But it became clear to me as the conversations went on.

The integration had simply overlooked him. He had fallen through the cracks. Not out of malice. But perhaps because the net was too coarse. Because the system worked, but didn't capture everything. Because in large processes, the small things often get lost. Because someone made a mistake when transferring data, or a "data glitch" skipped over his row.

So in the real world, there was nothing left for me to do – once it became clear that he had indeed been listed in one of the reorganization documents – but to speak with him about a termination agreement. In the new setup, there was no defined role for him. We agreed on a termination package.

A few weeks later, he called me again to let me know he wanted to activate the fast-track clause in the termination agreement – he had found a new position at the Fraunhofer Institute, which also offered him more opportunities for personal development.

I will never forget this case. It has been the only one of its kind in my career so far. But it was exemplary. And it left a deep impression on me. Here are a few lessons I've taken from it:

Twelve Learnings from a Seemingly Small Incident

1. **People are not numbers.**

It is our responsibility as leaders to ensure that every individual is taken care of – especially in times of upheaval.

2. **Mergers and integrations are difficult.**

The devil rarely lies in the strategy, but almost always in the details. That's where it is decided whether true integration will succeed or not.

3. **From the big picture to the individual is not automatic.**

Just because a name appears in SAP doesn't mean the integration is complete. Change processes need time – and attention to detail.

4. **Change must first reach the employees.**

Real integration only begins when employees know, understand, and accept their role. Otherwise, it remains a structural project without impact.

5. **How we deal with mistakes defines the quality of leadership.**

Mistakes happen. Acknowledging them – and addressing them openly – maintains credibility and builds trust.

6. **Empathy is not a weakness.**

On the contrary: it's what makes change sustainable. Especially when numbers are no longer enough.

7. **Even invisible employees often carry visible responsibilities.**

Long-serving, remote employees are at risk of being forgotten – even though they fulfill critical tasks.

8. **Standardization without individualization is dangerous.**

Integrated systems create order – but they don't see the human. Relying solely on processes means losing sight of what really matters.

9. Silence from employees is deceptive.

Not every dissatisfaction is loud. Many people keep going – until they no longer can.

10. Cultural differences in M&A are often underestimated.

Different norms and assumptions in the old and new companies shape behavior and expectations – and can unintentionally lead to exclusion.

11. Leadership reveals itself in the details.

Not in charts, not in plans. But when someone asks, "Do I still belong?" – and needs an answer.

12. Loyalty is no free pass for being forgotten.

Especially the quiet, reliable employees must not be overlooked. Their visibility must be actively ensured.

Conclusion:

That one phone call taught me more about integration than many strategy workshops.

It showed me that success does not lie solely in structure and process, but in the ability to truly see people – even when they seem to "blend in."

And perhaps true leadership lies precisely in this: Seeing where others look away. Listening before things get loud. Acting before it's too late.

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