



Ignorance Hurts

The uncertainties and constraints around a deal will conspire to keep you quiet, when what you really need to do is talk.



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Communications and Engagement: where value creation really begins

A merger or acquisition is one of the most disruptive moments in a company's life. It creates excitement at the top and uncertainty everywhere else. For managers and employees, the period before signing and the months of integration that follow can be unsettling, ambiguous and emotionally charged.

In these moments, clear and honest communication is one of the most powerful tools a leadership team has. Reassuring employees, engaging stakeholders and managing the narrative — rather than letting rumour fill the void — builds trust, protects focus and keeps your best people committed to the future. As we've seen repeatedly in Oaklin and BTG's work, the organisations that communicate well don't just avoid distraction; they accelerate alignment and surface issues early enough to fix them.

Yet good communication is often the first casualty of a deal. Legal constraints, uncertainty and fear of saying the wrong thing push leaders toward silence at precisely the moment when clarity matters most. And, as we've highlighted in *Leading the Deal*¹, actions taken pre-close, even when well-intentioned, can quietly undermine performance if they create mistrust or confusion post-deal.

One of the clearest reminders of the cost of poor communication came during Kraft's acquisition of Cadbury in 2010.

In the heat of the takeover battle, Kraft publicly committed to keeping Cadbury's Somerdale factory open: a statement that was reversed almost immediately after the deal closed. The UK Takeover Panel later ruled that Kraft had acted "irresponsibly" in its communications, and the company was forced to issue a public apology. The damage was immediate: employees felt misled, unions and politicians accused Kraft of bad faith, and public sentiment turned sharply against the deal. Integration began under a cloud of mistrust that could not easily be undone. Cadbury's CEO, CFO and several senior leaders resigned within weeks, employee trust collapsed, and the integration began under intense public and political scrutiny. Kraft paid a 50% premium for Cadbury, yet much of the promised value was eroded by mistrust, cultural friction and leadership churn.

By contrast, the Microsoft/LinkedIn acquisition in 2016 is widely regarded as a model for how early alignment and transparent communication can accelerate trust and performance. From the outset, Satya Nadella and Jeff Weiner presented a unified narrative about the purpose of the deal, the strategic logic behind it and the role each organisation would play. Both leaders communicated consistently — internally and externally — emphasising continuity of culture, respect for LinkedIn's autonomy and a clear vision for how the two companies would complement each other. This clarity, reinforced through joint messaging and visible leadership alignment, helped retain key talent, minimise uncertainty and create the conditions for one of Microsoft's most successful integrations.



The lesson is simple: In M&A, communication is not a soft issue. It shapes trust, reputation and the conditions for integration long before Day 1. When leaders misjudge it — by over-promising, under-communicating or staying silent — the consequences are real, visible and value-destructive.

in today's faster, more scrutinised deal environment, high-performing acquirers increasingly focus on **Day Zero readiness**: aligning leaders, shaping the narrative and preparing stakeholders before the deal is even announced. This early orchestration reduces uncertainty, accelerates integration and ensures that the moment the deal becomes public, the organisation is already moving with purpose.

This paper, developed in conjunction with Connectwell, sets out nine common myths that derail communications during M&A. For each, we explain the risk and offer practical, experience-led guidance to help leaders communicate with confidence before, during and after the deal; giving both the acquisition and the integration that follows the strongest possible start.

Myth 1: “We can't talk about a potential deal; legal and regulatory constraints prevent it.”

Reality: You can't disclose everything, but you can always communicate something.

In any deal, the legal process creates real constraints. But far too many leadership teams treat those constraints as a blanket ban on communication. The result is predictable: stakeholders receive no reassurance, rumours fill the vacuum, and

confidence erodes before the deal is even announced.

As we've seen repeatedly, silence is rarely neutral. It invites conjecture, fuels distraction and makes it harder to keep your plans under control.

The question is not *whether* to communicate, but *what* and *how*.

Effective deal leaders take a proactive, strategic approach to communication from the outset. They understand their market context, define what they can and cannot say, and plan how to manage interest, speculation and leaks. They map stakeholders early, decide who needs to know what and when, and ensure message and timing remain firmly in their control, even when uncertainty or conflicting pressures make that uncomfortable.

This is the essence of 'owning the narrative' that we emphasise in *Leading the Deal*: clarity beats silence, and preparation beats improvisation.

The takeaway: Build your communications plan and core messages before due diligence begins. This ensures everyone involved in the pre-deal process understands the boundaries, supports the approach and reinforces a consistent, credible story.

Myth 2: “We'll only have something to say after the deal is done.”

Reality: The story starts long before announcement. And many will be forming opinions as soon as that happens.



A persistent misconception in M&A is that integration — and therefore communication — begins at closing. While true in most ways, the groundwork for successful integration is laid well before the deal is finalised. Pre-close is when leaders can build understanding of the market context, anticipate competitor reactions and prepare the organisation for what comes next.

But don't forget that many leaders who are aware of the deal will already be forming their own opinions of this acquisition, and how it will impact them, well before completion. Their view will colour their own actions and priorities in the run-up to Day 1, and if not proactively managed, may result in a wave of unintended resignations on deal completion.

Day 1 is when silence is most dangerous. Every group — employees, suppliers, partners, customers, even competitors — will be watching closely and drawing conclusions. Each of them will have different priorities, levels of influence and information needs. Treating them as a single audience is a fast route to confusion and mistrust.

Effective deal leaders segment stakeholders early, understand their concerns and decide what can be shared, what must be held back and how each group can support, or hinder, the process. Critical suppliers may need reassurance to maintain service levels; collaborative partners may require careful handling; employees will want clarity on what the deal means for them. Thoughtful segmentation gives you control of your reputation and relationships at a moment when both are fragile.

Trust is reciprocal. When leaders are honest about what they can and cannot disclose, stakeholders typically respect boundaries.

When leaders say nothing, rumour fills the void, inside the organisation and in the market, creating the 'grapevine/rumour mill feedback loop' that heightens anxiety and derails plans.



Leakage is another predictable risk. Preparing for it is not pessimism; it is professionalism. Understanding where leaks are most likely, how damaging they could be and how you will respond ensures you stay in control of the narrative even when events move quickly.

Closing the deal is not the beginning of your communication planning, nor is it the end. It is simply the next chapter, bringing new audiences, new messages and new expectations.

The takeaway: Conduct a full stakeholder analysis during due diligence, and build contingency communications for potential leaks. This ensures you understand the needs, risks and expectations of every group long before Day 1.

Myth 3: “We’re really just buying their customer base. There’s no need to communicate.”

Reality: Customers stay when employees stay. Employees stay when they trust you.



Even — perhaps especially — when the strategic logic of a deal is centred on customers, the success of that strategy still depends on people. Employees are the ones who deliver the customer experience, protect relationships and bring the combined organisation to life. Ignoring them, or assuming they'll simply 'get on with things', is one of the fastest ways to erode the very value you're trying to acquire.

In any merger, employees watch leadership behaviour closely. They spot misalignment instantly. Saying one thing and doing another signals a hidden agenda, fuels mistrust and gives the grapevine permission to invent its own narrative: often about job security, priorities or which parts of the legacy organisation will be 'left behind' in favour of the shiny new toy just bought.

Clear, honest communication is the antidote. It allows leaders to explain what will change, what won't, and why. It also creates space to acknowledge what hasn't been working and what the new organisation aims to improve; something employees are often relieved to hear. As we've seen repeatedly, inviting employees to shape aspects of the future organisation builds ownership, reduces resistance and strengthens commitment.

But this only works if the intent is genuine. Token involvement or vague promises do more harm than good. Credibility comes from consistency: doing what you say, and saying only what you intend to do.

And alignment matters just as much as honesty. Employees don't hear what you say; they hear what you *all* say. Even small inconsistencies between leaders create doubt, fuel speculation and undermine confidence in the integration. A disciplined, aligned leadership voice is one of the strongest signals of stability during a deal.

The takeaway: Never communicate anything you don't believe or won't follow through on. Trust is built through repeated, visible alignment between words and actions; and it is trust that keeps employees engaged, customers loyal and value intact.

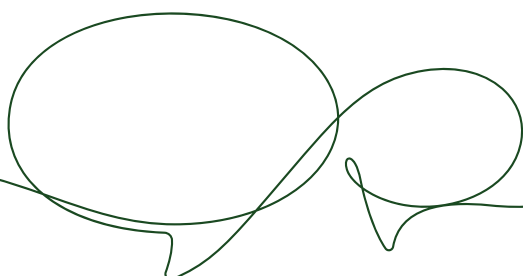
Myth 4: “We can only properly think about branding and marketing once the purchase agreement is signed.”

Reality: Brand is a deal asset. You can't afford to design it last.

If you're exploring a merger or acquisition, you've already decided there is something the target can bring that you can't (or won't) build alone. That future needs a clear vision, and a core part of that vision is brand: the promise you make to the market, and the story your people are asked to deliver.

Brand is not a post-signing cosmetic exercise. As we emphasise in *Leading the Deal* and in our work with clients, it sits squarely at the intersection of strategy, culture and execution. Your external promise and your internal reality must line up. Customers need to recognise why the combined organisation is better; employees need to believe in it enough to carry it through.

That means understanding, early, how the two brands relate:





- Where propositions and values align.
- Where they complement each other.
- Where they conflict and need resolving.

An M&A event is a rare opportunity to sharpen or refresh your brand: to clarify what is distinctive, to retire what no longer fits, and to codify the combined promise in a way that supports both customer growth and talent attraction. Done early, this work underpins marketing, employee retention and integration planning. Done late, it becomes a rushed badge-swap that convinces no one.

Engaging employees in the refreshed brand deepens their connection to the new organisation and strengthens loyalty. Through them, you reach customers, suppliers and partners with a coherent, lived proposition rather than a slide-deck slogan.

The takeaway: Think through brand implications and decisions internally and externally before close. Getting the message right on Announcement Day is critical to winning the support of both customers and employees. Without that support, the deal will not deliver.

Myth 5: “Communicating in uncertain conditions will spook our customers and suppliers. Better to stay quiet.”

Reality: Silence creates more instability than transparency ever will.

It’s natural for leaders to worry that early communication might unsettle customers, alert competitors or make suppliers nervous. But keeping key partners in the dark is far riskier. If they hear about the deal through rumour — not from you — they will question

the strength of the relationship and fill the gaps with their own assumptions. Strategic partners should already be visible in your stakeholder map. These are the organisations whose confidence you cannot afford to lose: critical suppliers, major customers, joint-venture partners, long-term collaborators. Each has different contractual obligations, confidentiality expectations and sensitivities; and each requires a tailored approach.

The goal is not to disclose confidential details; it is to manage expectations. A carefully framed heads-up (“there may be changes ahead; we’ll brief you fully when we can”) reassures partners without breaching restrictions. It signals respect, protects continuity and prevents service degradation driven by anxiety or speculation.

This is also where disciplined planning matters. Knowing what you can and cannot say, when to say it and how to respond if information leaks keeps you in control of the narrative, even when events move quickly. A proactive approach demonstrates confidence in the relationship and belief in its future.

The takeaway: Engage critical customers and suppliers as early as you can. Understand their likely reactions and don’t let them learn about the deal on Announcement Day. Proactive reassurance protects service, stabilises relationships and prevents unnecessary value leakage.

Myth 6: “Nothing is really going to change – so why make a big deal about it?”

Reality: Leaders consistently underestimate the scale and emotional impact of change.



One of the most common traps in M&A is the belief that the change is minor. Leaders often focus on the strategic logic, while employees experience the practical and emotional disruption: new leadership, new branding, new ways of working. When leaders downplay this, it creates a mismatch between intent and experience, and that gap fuels resistance, anxiety and slow adoption.

The organisations that handle integration well are those whose leaders face the change head-on. They frame the merger as an opportunity, not a threat, and they communicate early and consistently about what the future looks like. As we emphasised in *Leading the Deal*, tone matters: employees take their cues from how leaders describe the journey.

A simple but powerful tool here is William Bridges' 4Ps², a model we use frequently in our integration work:

Purpose	Picture
Why are we doing this?	What will the future look like?
Plan	Part
How will we get there?	What does this mean for me?

The last 'P' is the one most often neglected — and the one employees care about most. When leaders explain the personal implications clearly and repeatedly, people can place themselves in the story. They understand how they fit, what will change and why it matters.

This is how you turn uncertainty into engagement.

The Disney/Pixar acquisition in 2006 is often highlighted as a model of communication done well. Before the deal closed, leaders invested heavily in building trust, aligning expectations and addressing cultural concerns — particularly Pixar's fear of being absorbed into Disney's bureaucracy. Leaders communicated openly about the purpose of the deal, the future operating model and the role each organisation would play. This early, people-centred approach preserved talent, protected creativity and helped the combined business deliver exceptional long-term value.

The takeaway: Ensure all communications at every stage reinforce the 4Ps, and test whether different stakeholder groups genuinely understand and accept them. Clarity reduces resistance; vagueness amplifies it.

Myth 7: "If we talk about the deal, our best people will leave – better to stay quiet."

Reality: Silence is a far bigger retention risk than transparency.

Leaders often fear that early communication will unsettle top talent. In practice, the opposite is true. Saying nothing sends a clear signal: your retention strategy is to hope people stay. That passivity creates anxiety, not loyalty. High performers feel safer when they know leaders are thinking about them, engaging with them and being honest about what is known, and what isn't.

Employees who feel abandoned will look after themselves. But when relationships with managers are strong, and intent is clear, people are far more willing to tolerate uncertainty.



They stay because they feel connected: to their team, their leader and the organisation's future.

Silence also ignores a critical truth: acquirer employees feel uncertainty too. They worry about duplication, leadership changes, cultural shifts and loss of influence. If leaders communicate only with the acquired organisation, they inadvertently create a two-tier culture: one informed, one left guessing.

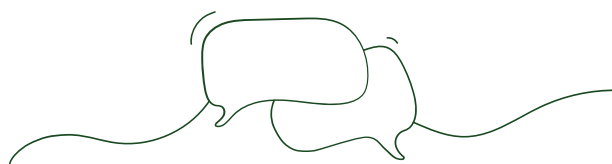
It's also worth asking a harder question: if your best people are ready to leave at the first hint of a merger, what else is going on? M&A often exposes underlying issues — weak leadership, cultural frictions, overloaded ways of working — that were already eroding engagement. The deal becomes the trigger, not the cause.

This moment is an opportunity to take a clean, objective look at the organisation and address the deeper drivers of dissatisfaction. Retention cannot be treated narrowly. It sits within the broader context of culture, leadership, development and how people experience the organisation day-to-day. A merger simply amplifies whatever is already there.

Culture sits at the heart of this. Communication is one of the earliest and most visible cultural signals employees receive during a merger. The tone, transparency and behaviour of leaders tell people far more about the future culture than any slide deck. Treating communication as a cultural act, not just an information flow, helps set the foundations for a combined organisation people want to be part of.

The AOL/Time Warner merger in 2000 remains one of the clearest demonstrations of how poor communication and cultural misalignment can derail even the most strategically compelling deal. Leaders failed to articulate a shared vision, downplayed cultural differences and communicated inconsistently across the two organisations. Employees on both sides reported feeling “kept in the dark”, and mistrust quickly hardened into resistance. The result was one of the most value-destructive mergers in corporate history: a cautionary tale of what happens when leaders underestimate the emotional and cultural impact of a deal.

The takeaway: Do you know what engages your people in both organisations, keeps them performing and makes them want to stay? If not, find out, and act on it. Proactive, honest communication is by far the strongest retention tool you have.



Myth 8: “We need to focus on systems and processes first. We'll communicate more once the ‘people’ changes start to happen.”

Reality: People integration enables systems integration, never the other way around.

Many acquirers default to tackling the ‘hard’ items first: financial consolidation, compliance, systems integration. It feels logical, even essential. But as we see time and again, prioritising systems over people is one of the most common — and costly — mistakes.



If roles, relationships and leadership alignment aren't settled early, systems work becomes a battleground. Employees cling to familiar processes, guard their turf and resist change because they don't yet feel secure. The result is technically sound integration delivered into an organisation that isn't ready to adopt it, slowing performance and eroding value.

A client once put it perfectly: "If the managers are on board, they'll find a way through anything. If they're not, no amount of planning will save you."

Systems implementers know this too. New tools and processes only work when employees feel safe enough to let go of the old ways and contribute their expertise to designing the new. That shift from "my interests" to "our future" only happens when basic needs are met: clarity of role, trust in leadership, and confidence in the direction of travel.

When people feel settled, creativity and collaboration increase. Teams become more willing to innovate, challenge assumptions and co-create better ways of working. That's when systems integration accelerates, and sticks.

The takeaway: Get people settled in their new roles first, then implement systems to support them. People come first, and so does the communication required to help them feel secure, informed and ready to move.

Myth 9: "We've communicated repeatedly, but people still don't get it. We'll just have to do more."

Reality: If your communications isn't working, more of the same won't fix the problem.

It's easy to feel frustrated when you've held multiple briefings and employees still seem confused or anxious. But this is a normal part of change. People need time to process, question, test and revisit information before they can accept it. Transparency is only the starting point for employee engagement, not the finish line.

Modern change research is clear: leaders are not just communicators, they are sense-makers. Employees don't simply need information; they need help interpreting what that information means for their team, their work and their future. The most effective leaders create **meaning**, not just messages: helping people join the dots, contextualise decisions and understand how the deal fits into the broader story of the business.

A one-way broadcast won't shift mindsets; people need opportunities to explore, challenge and make sense of the change for themselves. Effective M&A leaders create structured **two-way** communication channels and keep them open. They equip and train their managers – the most trusted messengers – to repeat key messages consistently, handle uncertainty without defensiveness and, most importantly, listen. Managers don't need all the answers; they need confidence in the narrative and comfort in the ambiguity.



Senior-leader visibility also matters. Walk-arounds, listening sessions, informal Q&A forums and **presence** on Day 1 all carry disproportionate weight. In moments of uncertainty, people look to leaders not just for answers, but for presence too. Visible leadership accelerates trust far more effectively than perfectly crafted messages.

And leaders must also test whether communication is actually being understood and believed. Surveys, listening groups, change agents and informal feedback loops reveal how people have interpreted what they've heard, and where emotions sit. Without this insight, you're communicating blind.

This also means using the right channels. Today's integrations rely on a blend of short-form video, manager toolkits, micro-updates and digital listening tools; not just traditional email and town halls. Frequent, small, human-centred communication beats infrequent, high-production broadcasts every time. The goal is to create a steady rhythm of clarity, not a series of one-off announcements.

The takeaway: Understanding, belief, agreement and support are outcomes, not assumptions. If you don't know whether people 'get' your messages, find out. Dialogue, not broadcasting, is what moves people through change.

Conclusion

Integration communication isn't a workstream. It's a value lever.

M&A succeeds or fails on far more than strategy, synergies or integration. It succeeds when people understand the journey, trust the intent and feel part of the future being created. And that only happens when leaders communicate early, consistently and with conviction.

The organisations that outperform don't necessarily communicate more; they communicate better. They plan their narrative early pre-deal, engage stakeholders with purpose, treat employees on both sides as adults, and use communication as a tool to build alignment, not simply to broadcast information. If there's one message to take from these nine myths, it's this:

Communication and engagement are where value creation really begins. They shape confidence before Day 1, accelerate integration after Day 1, and sustain performance long after the deal is done.

As deals move faster and stakeholder expectations rise, communication is no longer a soft skill — it is a strategic capability. Organisations and leaders who treat it as such don't just avoid the pitfalls. They consistently unlock the full potential of the deal.



Unconventional Wisdom: Practices For Communicating During M&A

1. **Plan early.** Shape your narrative and build your core messages before due diligence begins.
2. **Segment ruthlessly.** Conduct a full stakeholder analysis and understand the needs, risks and expectations of every group.
3. **Tell the truth.** Never commit to anything you don't believe or intend to do. Credibility compounds.
4. **Align your brand.** Think through brand implications internally and externally and do it pre-close.
5. **Reassure your partners.** Speak to critical customers and suppliers early to understand their reactions and stabilise relationships.
6. **Anchor to the 4Ps.** Ensure all communications reinforce Purpose, Picture, Plan and Part. Test for understanding.
7. **Know your people.** Understand what engages them, what keeps them performing and what makes them stay.
8. **Settle roles before systems.** Get people aligned and secure first; then integrate the processes that support them.
9. **Treat both sides equally.** Pay attention to employees in both organisations and avoid creating an information hierarchy.
10. **Test for understanding.** Check whether people genuinely understand, believe and support what you're telling them.



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