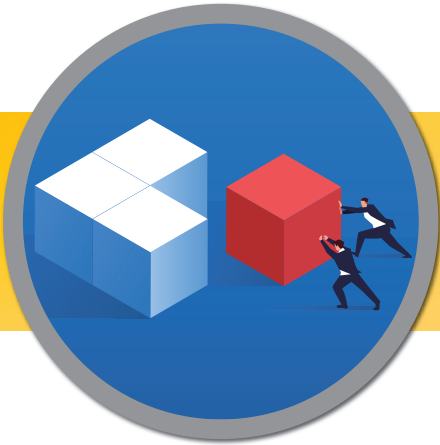


CULTURE



## Managing culture through merger

### Strategies for successfully leading organizational change

**ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE** is about people and their roles in the achievement of the agency's mission. It's hard to steady the helm while navigating the seas of change, but that is what Mike Gifford, the CEO of Vivent Health, has done the past few years.

Since Gifford joined Vivent Health's predecessor, the AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin, in 1993 and he was promoted to CEO a decade ago, not only has the mission of the agency changed, but so has the population they serve. In 1999, the best minds fighting AIDS in Wisconsin said, "Don't provide health care." Today Vivent is the largest provider of HIV health care in the state with the best clinical outcomes.

This once Milwaukee-focused AIDS Service Organization has gone from local to statewide to multi-state during Gifford's tenure, rapidly increasing the population they serve while experiencing major organizational change. These proven services are now being delivered in four other major cities in America.

For years, the organization's HIV Medical Home model has been the gold standard for others throughout the country. Now that model is being introduced in Austin, Denver, St. Louis and Kansas City as part of a merger of AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin, Rocky Mountain CARES, St. Lou-

is Effort for AIDS and AIDS Services of Austin, a combination that created Vivent Health.

As a result, the organization has experienced a number of challenges along the way. Some organizations preferred their existing model and resisted buying in to Vivent Health's model, while others have welcomed Vivent with open arms, resulting in an ability to better serve their organization's population.

Merging the culture of one organization with another is just as much a challenge as a change in leadership style.

The ultimate goal is to better serve their patient base, and those who accepted and adopted Vivent's model realized their patients would be better served in the long run. Where resistance was met, it was about control - local versus national.

In some cases, a loss of identity was an issue. These organizations lost sight of the "superordinate goal": to better serve their patients, not protect their brand or leadership. It was critical that the core values regarding patient focus matched up and were clearly defined and supported by the agency's leadership.

How did Gifford and his board successfully navigate the turbulent waters while maintaining their high levels of service? Here are some of the strategies they used in approaching each target agency:

1. They set guiding principles that are focused on the needs of patients to direct merger discussions and decisions.
2. They created a shared understanding of what is important. At Vivent their market culture is: "We are passionate champions providing unfettered access to care, in pursuit of the finest quality outcomes known to humankind and assuring financial strength to be here until the final day of AIDS."
3. They built the relationships based on trust. They stressed that they were not here to take over another organization; rather they were entering into the partnership to ensure both organizations continue to thrive. For example, they built plans together for expanded care with the Austin leadership team by identifying their needs prior to the

formal merger.

4. Vivent invested time and resources bringing the diverse cultures of the organizations together by focusing on the needs of the patients.
5. All discussions were entered into with a sense of curiosity and equality. The success in developing new services in Denver and St. Louis made the conversations with the leadership at the Austin agency easier. The history of Vivent sticking to their commitments built trust between the parties and facilitated easier conversations.
6. A mainstay of Vivent's strategy is to guarantee governance roles for board members of the organization joining Vivent Health. This includes serving on the national board of directors, board committees or a local advisory board. This direct involvement in decision making ensures that local needs are always prioritized and balances local and national viewpoints.

Vivent invested the time and energy needed prior to the merger to ensure that the two agencies' goals, objectives and delivery systems were aligned. This increases the potential for a smooth transition and success of the merger. ■



### CARY SILVERSTEIN

*Cary Silverstein, MBA, is a speaker, author and consultant, a former executive for Gimbel's Midwest and JH Collectibles, and a former professor for DeVry University's Keller Graduate School. He can be reached at [csilve1013@aol.com](mailto:csilve1013@aol.com).*