[CASEBOOK]

Wells Fargo Advisors: 5 Best Practices for Merger Training Programs

"If we focus on these five best practices, we will have a much greater potential to meet and exceed the desired program outcomes."

BY TOM ALLEN & TODD FLEMING

Being the leader of a training team during a large-scale organizational change can be a daunting challenge. The demands for training and change management during large mergers are almost always more than a company's training team can handle with normal business planning, processes and staffing levels. The Wells Fargo Advisors training team was tasked with supporting two major mergers within a four-year period. Below is a timeline of significant merger events since 2007:

- **May 2007** — A. G. Edwards and Wachovia Securities Merger Announced
- **July 2008** — Wachovia Securities HR Conversion
- **October 2008** — Wachovia/Wells Fargo Merger Announced
- **February 2009** — A. G. Edwards systems conversion. Primary audience of 9,000 team members in 700 locations
- **January 2010** — Wells Fargo HR Conversion
- **January 2011** — Wells Fargo Advisors systems conversion. Primary audience of 1,800 team members, plus 5,700 independent brokers, 2,300 contact center reps and support team members.

We came out of those mergers with a comprehensive set of lessons learned. We have filtered through those lessons learned to define what we believe are the five best practices that we will use for future large-scale programs. These best practices are aimed at the program level, in order to create a program where effective training design can take place. These best practices are:

Proper resourcing is more than just the right people in the right jobs

- Defined Program Principles
- Solid Business Partnerships
- Effective Resource Planning
- Comprehensive Quality Management
- Measurement, Measurement, Measurement

Uncovering the Needs

Determining what and who was changing as a result of the mergers was challenging at best. It took longer than we expected, and there was a significant lack of detail early on in the process. Consequently, a lot of time was spent discussing the change with leaders, and observing the processes in place at both legacy organizations. We needed to be able to come up with a high level plan within the first three months after the announcement of the merger. We had an 18-month window prior to conversion, and much of the program-level planning had to be done in the first three months. Our first planning step was to define principles for the program.

Defined Program Principles

We have found that early alignment is absolutely critical. The web of interconnections in a merger can be overwhelming, quite honestly. Executive leadership, training and HR leadership, field managers and team members from both organizations, training team members, and contractors are all coming together. A set of clearly defined program principles enabled that alignment.

The principles were the pillars of the program. They set both the expectations and the boundaries for the training program. They were to be used by all stakeholders, including training team members, to make plans and decisions. They:

- Articulated the vision for the program in more tactical terms
- Defined the elements of the program we were not willing to compromise
- Provided a framework for program decisions
- Enabled more effective communication to program stakeholders
- Formed a baseline for expectations

One of our program principles was:

"Focus on survival skills pre-conversion; deliver in small increments, repeated over time, as close to conversion as possible."

This principle may seem fairly obvious. It did, however, tell stakeholders how the training organization would approach implementation planning, and on what basis content decisions would be made during design and development. The principle clearly indicated that if it was not a survival skill, it could wait until after conversion.

During almost every leadership meeting, we referred to our program principles. We were seeking both agreement and acknowledgement from all key stakeholders. It was not enough that they knew the principles. We had to know they would support us throughout the program, using the principles as a basis for that support.

Business Partnerships

One of our key lessons learned coming out of the first merger was that we really needed to put more focus on business partnerships. We had initially found ourselves in relationships with other business units that had a fairly high degree of conflict, and had challenges with communication and information flow. We were not able to get the information we needed, and were not able to muster the support necessary to develop and support a successful training program. We worked hard to recover and establish those relationships.

For our second merger, we started out by deliberately establishing business partnerships. We approached all of the business units with which we directly interacted. We talked about communication, reviewed our principles to gain agreement and understanding, and ensured that we all had the same expectations for performance and results.

As a result of our early efforts to establish these partnerships, we found that we:

- Had access to better and more timely information
- Had more support in resolving issues, and were able to secure help resolving problems
- Had more credibility during multi-functional discussions
- Had access to more resources, and more support with budget requests

We put a high level of effort and time in maintaining those partnerships. It really did require constant effort. Some of the activities that helped establish and maintain our business partnerships were:

- Liaisons with primary responsibility of working with other departments
- Active steering groups with key stakeholders
- Joint status reporting / sharing responsibility for keeping executives informed
- Pilot content with key leaders

Resource Planning

We had to determine how we would get all of the work done very early in the planning process. For the first merger, we brought on contract consultants as individuals through staff augmentation firms. We would post a position, and receive a number of resumes that we needed to screen, interview and onboard. We had a small internal team dedicated to the merger training, and the time and effort required for the logistics alone pulled us away from the critical planning and oversight tasks.

For the second merger, we started looking for a single sourcing vendor that could manage all of the logistics involved with finding, selecting and onboarding the large number of resources required. We knew that proper resourcing is more than just the right people in the right jobs. It was also enough of the right people in the right jobs, with enough support to ensure that the team is functioning to its highest potential. We did not know exactly what, who or how much we needed, but we started with an estimate and built a vendor agreement that supported flexibility in the resourcing approach. Our program staffing partner, VisionCor, Inc., was responsible for:

- Conducting all job posting, resume screening, and initial interviewing
- Providing an orientation to consultants
- Managing the process of setting up a contractor to operate in the client environment
- Providing all administrative support to the contractors
- Working with the training leadership to manage the scheduling and utilization of resources
- Maintaining a field presence on-site

Budgeting is obviously an important step in resource planning. Without a budget, we would not have been able to have any additional resources. We found that a budget advocate — someone at a senior level who understands the importance of properly funding the training organization, and someone who can work with the executive team to get your budget request approved — was also a very good idea.

Comprehensive Quality Management

Quality is inarguably an important part of everything we do in business. Comprehensive quality management as a deliberate part of an overall plan is something on which we spent a good deal of time. When we talk about quality, we mean more than eliminating typos or bugs. Our Quality Management Plan ensured that:

- Training and communications were **targeted to the needs of the audience and business.**
- Training and communications were **in line with company culture.**
- Information was **accurate**.
- Deliverables were **in line with the overall plan.**

The following are some mechanisms for comprehensive quality management that we employed:

- **Sponsors:** We assigned a senior training team member or manager as a sponsor for each part of the curriculum. The sponsor primarily reviewed materials to ensure the training was in line with the needs of the audience and company culture.
- **Curriculum Owner:** As the name implies, a curriculum owner owned the curriculum, and ensured that all deliverables are in line with the overall plan.
- **Subject Matter Expert (SME) Integration:** Live interaction in person or through tools like Live Meeting were promoted during content gathering and reviews as much as possible.
- **Pilots with Target Audience:** All material was piloted at multiple levels, and with different audiences. We found a lot of new information by getting feedback during the pilot sessions.

Measurement, Measurement, Measurement

Measurement to us was important only if it helped us meet the business objectives for the program. We began our measurement approach by asking, "How do we know whether or not we are meeting our business objectives?" To that end, our measurement started with the activities that the team had defined as being critical to the accomplishment of the business objectives. The activities were then tracked and measurements were added to those activities to determine if they were being accomplished at the appropriate levels. Activities were tracked before, during and post-implementation. They included both project team and training activities. We framed our measurement program by asking two questions: "Are we getting ready?" and "How ready are we?"

We have learned that measurement by itself is not enough. Every effective measurement must have a specific goal attached to it. The measurements and goals will typically have a timeline established as well.

The final element of our measurement plan was a contingency plan. If the measurement was not in line with the goal, a contingency action was triggered to bring the activity back in line. Since only activities critical to meeting the business objectives were being tracked, if they were out of line, they needed to be corrected. By having contingencies in advance, action could be immediately implemented. Additionally, the act of contingency planning often improved the initial implementation and reduced the chance of a problem in the first place.

Parting Thoughts

These are obviously not the only planning aspects of a well-designed and executed training program. We feel, however, that if we focus on these five best practices, we will have a much greater potential to meet and exceed the desired program outcomes. We hope that you are able to make your life easier by avoiding some of the lessons we learned over time.

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