

How to Succeed at Consolidation: The East Naples/ Golden Gate Fire Districts' Experience

By: Pat Lynch, Ph.D., President

After decades of public debate about consolidating the numerous fire districts in southwest Florida, two districts finally moved from words to action. In April 2013, following a referendum that indicated overwhelming public support for consolidation of independent fire districts, the East Naples and Golden Gate Fire Districts took the first formal step toward a merger by signing an interlocal agreement to engage in an administrative consolidation of their management and operational services pending the development of, and agreement on, a joint merger plan. Although a full merger still requires legislative approval, the governor's signature, and a public referendum in November 2014, positive results of the operational consolidation and strong support of all stakeholder groups suggest a high probability of success.

Leading the East Naples and Golden Gate Fire Districts merger process are Fire Chief Kingman Schuldt and the districts' Boards of Fire Commissioners. Based on my observations of the consolidation/merger process over the past year as well as conversations with Chief Schuldt, I identified some of the factors that have enabled the districts to move forward successfully in spite of initial stiff resistance. Though not exhaustive, the list offers important insights into what it takes to develop a process for successfully achieving a major, complex change that has major implications for a wide variety of stakeholders. Here are some of those elements:

- Recognizing that change is a process, not an event or a task.
- Devoting the time to doing the homework necessary to implement the process successfully.
- Listening actively to all parties.
- Identifying and addressing up front "What's in it for me?" for each stakeholder group.
- Methodically engaging in the on-going education of all stakeholder groups.
- Providing on-going education and updates to employees so they know what's going on and can answer questions from other stakeholders.
- Focusing relentlessly on the value to be gained from the merger.
- Making the firefighters' union a partner in the success of the effort.
- Getting other key influencers on board early.
- Painting stakeholders, including naysayers, into the merger "picture."
- Establishing high levels of trust with stakeholder groups.
- Communicating a consistent message.
- Directly addressing the emotional side of the proposed merger – specifically, the fears of both communities that a consolidation of resources would result in the loss of identification with their respective fire departments.
- Setting realistic expectations up front and reinforcing them frequently.

- Developing a detailed implementation plan.
- Holding people accountable for delivering on the implementation plan's tasks.
- Having disciplined leaders who hold each other accountable for staying the course and not becoming distracted ("Burke's Law").
- Engaging in a public relations campaign to re-brand the combined organization in a way that retains identifiable elements of each district.
- Being very clear about what can and cannot be done.
- Working with politicians and administrators at local and state levels.
- Ensuring the merger process is procedurally fair (i.e., transparent, free of bias, and with meaningful opportunities for stakeholders to provide input).
- Demonstrating and communicating the results in a timely manner.
- Enlisting people with complementary talents and skills (e.g., long-term vision and short-term attention to details) in the merger process.
- Making the Fire Chief the public "face" of the effort while liberally sharing the credit for successes.
- Providing easy stakeholder access to the Fire Chief and prompt response to questions.
- Dedicating a staff member to manage the details of the process.
- Creating a Merger Team of stakeholders whose bi-weekly meetings are open to the public and whose input and actions are communicated to all stakeholders.
- Creating an easily accessible, up to date "Playbook," a clearly written, easy to understand document that contains accurate, timely fact sheets, projections, results, contact information, frequently asked questions, and other information related to the merger process.
- Delivering results as promised.

For leaders faced with consolidating resources at any level – e.g., of activities, of functions, of similar agencies, of dissimilar agencies – the comprehensive, collaborative, and transparent change management process developed and implemented by the East Naples and Golden Gate Fire Districts provides an instructive blueprint. Why re-invent the wheel when you can learn from these districts' hard work and positive experience? ➔

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