



Everything I Need to Know About Business Integrations, I Learned in Kindergarten

BY MATT EARNEST AND SCOTT LEVY

Business integrations are inherently complex. Multiple work streams come together to merge two or more organizations, with the goal of realizing the value proposed by the deal. Project teams are often full of individuals with tremendous experience, advanced degrees, and a plethora of technical knowledge. With all of the planning, diligence, and expertise, it's surprising to learn that many integrations still fail to realize their expected value — nearly half of those done for scale and more than two-thirds done for scope.

Establishing and defining guiding principles addresses and avoids the traps of integration. We believe focusing on these principles helps cut through the complexity and focus on value-add activities that drive toward successfully achieving the goals of the integration.

1. Strong leadership with effective governance
2. Sustained strategic value creation mindset
3. Visibility and accountability, leveraging metrics, and dashboards
4. Communication and collaboration
5. Decision focused
6. Consistent, repeatable cadence, with continuity between phases
7. Visual and lightweight tools
8. Tailored-to-fit culture and scope of integration

Even with strong principles to guide you, the inherent complexity still exists. At the same time, there's a poem by Robert Fulghum in which he claims to have learned everything he needs to know about life while he was in kindergarten. Could the same ideas apply to these complex business integrations? Maybe we really learned these same concepts while we were in kindergarten — and just called them something else.

Share everything.

We learned to play well with our friends and to share our toys, even when we didn't want to. Today, instead of sharing toys, we have to share knowledge across teams as a key element of a successful integration. Failure to share information can lead to disconnected cross-functional processes, duplicated work, and misguided assumptions. At best, it creates frustration. At worst, it can jeopardize the timeline, the budget, and the success of the integration.

Make sure your team is reaching out and taking the initiative to share with other teams on an informal

basis through co-located work spaces or a budget for one-on-one lunches with team members. Work with the project leadership (or, if you are project leadership, you know what to do!) to make sure formal opportunities are available to share, including team-wide meetings and communications, integration meetings, and team read-outs. Sharing is even more important now, as the risk of not sharing is no longer just a short-lived temper tantrum.

Play fair.

On the playground, it was a game of Four Square. The winner was the server holding the King square. Along with victory came the right to define the rules. Technically, the King could make up any rules he wanted to. Was it fair? If they weren't, it wasn't long before the King realized no one wanted to play with him.

Fast forward to the integration team war room. No longer are we playing a school-yard game with rules that could only come from the mind of a creative 5-year-old. We look to our leadership team to define the objectives of the integration. We work tirelessly to define a strategy that allows us to meet those objectives. We construct processes to enable consistent execution of work tasks, decision-making, and the inevitable escalation when a decision cannot be made within the team. Keep these objectives and processes in mind when making decisions, making resource assignments, and prioritizing initiatives, and you'll play fair with your team. Circumventing the process can threaten your project's success. Rules, like holders of the King square, do change though. When change comes, playing fair means adapting your strategy to account for new objectives and, just as importantly, effectively communicating with all members of the team.





Clean up your own mess.

This was the same at home and in kindergarten. Mom made us keep our rooms clean, and our teacher made sure we put away all the puzzle pieces from the Sesame Street Big Bird puzzle before we moved on to finger painting (which generated a whole different mess). Cleaning up made sure we could reuse the toys and materials the next time because they were properly cleaned and stored.

We hope these good habits were instilled then, because they are just as important now. Much like the kindergarten classroom, integration projects seem to always occur in a confined space. We share desks and tables, conference rooms and projectors, whiteboards and break rooms. It's usually a tight space and very close quarters. A clean, organized space makes it more manageable and reflects a clean and organized work product. Have you ever gone into a conference room for a big discussion and the whiteboard was covered with leftover notes from weeks of previous meetings? Or leftovers from yesterday's lunch meeting (see Milk and Cookies on page 13). It boils down to basic etiquette, but it's important when sharing space to clean up your mess, keep your desk/area neat and organized, and respect the space of team members. Your mom — and your kindergarten teacher — will be proud, and your co-workers will be appreciative.



Additional Insights

For additional insights into business integration best practices, check out the article “Surviving the M&A Rollercoaster,” written by Brian Betkowski, Ryan Ogden, and Nimesh Shah, from the Fall 2013 edition of *The Jabian Journal*. In it, they outline the 11 most common traps companies fall into when going through a merger or acquisition, and details how to avoid them.

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Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

Everyone will make mistakes. It's important to own them, even when they are unintentional. Just like your kindergarten teacher always used to say, “Use your words.” That allows you and the team to address the issue and move forward in the best interest of the company. Someone may have been personally offended. Or a poorly estimated change request caused by a technical mistake is delaying the timeline. Whatever the case, own your mistake and, when you're leading a team, set the clear expectation that you expect team members to own their mistakes. This isn't about finger pointing or throwing a team member under the (school) bus. It's about taking accountability for mistakes and preventing personal animosities. Bottling up emotions in kindergarten ultimately led to a meltdown. It didn't work well then and certainly won't serve the objectives of an integration now.

Wash your hands before you eat.

Yes, first washing your hands and then eating is good hygiene. But it's also good process flow: step one, then step two. It would make no sense to eat before washing your hands. Nor would it be very hygienic to eat without washing your hands at all. The same is true for many of the steps required to, say, issue a check to a vendor. When two independent entities integrate,

change is inevitable. An implementation is destined to fail without detailed process flows that are developed against a common template throughout the entire project.

It's also important to note that there's a process flow for developing a process flow! Process flow discussion and documentation are part of the Design Phase, not the Construction Phase. Trying to shortcut the process and jumping right into implementing an integration is guaranteed to cause problems. It's like eating before you wash your hands. Sure, it can be done. But that will be one dirty sandwich.

Warm cookies and milk are good for you.

In kindergarten and in the corporate world, some fond memories include taking breaks to enjoy a cupcake to celebrate a birthday, or a pizza party thrown as a well-deserved reward. Recognition and food bring teams together, especially those that are coming together for the first time through integration. These days, it's unlikely to be milk and cookies. Cookies have gluten. Most people don't know what that is, but they certainly aren't eating it.

Get engaged with the team and find something special to reward collaboration and accomplishment. Show them they are special, rather than just telling them, and build a project culture around it. Snack breaks, food during midday meetings, or team dinners are all great ways to demonstrate that the hard work is appreciated. It will pay dividends.





Learn some and think some.

In kindergarten, we learned the phrase, “You have two ears and one mouth for a reason. Listen twice as much as you speak.” Pretty wise words that apply to most conference room settings as well. How many times have you been part of a discussion that goes round and round because someone is too busy talking and is not listening to the conversation?

Be open to what others have to say and don’t assume you already know everything. For some of us, it’s harder than you think. If you find that your response is on the tip of your tongue before the other person has completed their thought, you aren’t listening. Take advantage of the experience of your colleagues and try to learn from them — from their product or customer experiences, from their previous integration experiences, from their personal experiences. But share your knowledge with them too — it doesn’t help for you to hold hostage your information to try to leverage it for personal gain later. (Ahem, remember the part about sharing everything?) Finally, sometimes it’s necessary to find a place where you’re not talking, listening, or working, but just thinking. Think about what you’ve learned. Think about the integration from someone else’s point of view (a customer, a vendor, your executive team). Think about what the company originally set out to achieve with the acquisition. It’s amazing what can happen when you allow your ears and your brain a chance to do their jobs!

Draw and paint and sing and dance.

Remember how much fun it was to draw? Don’t underestimate the value of a little artistic expression in the corporate world. No, we’re not suggesting that you only move around the office by doing the electric

slide (though that could be pretty entertaining for the team!) or only speak in song. Use those whiteboards, flipcharts, markers, and even PowerPoint slides to express your ideas. A powerful visual aid can bring immediate clarity to a confusing issue. A simple sketch on the board can help others see the vision in your mind. Or a rhyming tag line (aka lyric) can spur adoption of change. Also keep in mind that different people learn and remember in different ways. Using some creativity to generate these visual aids is a great communication strategy.

Play and work every day.

In kindergarten, our classes had clever names like Black Cats and Blue Owls, Orange Ducks and Green Frogs. We all wanted to be the best. Highest test scores received treats like pizza parties. The teacher used friendly competition to pull everyone up to a higher level. (We never could knock off those Black Cats!) Delivery teams feel the same way. Even as adults, we all love recognition among our peers for hard work to achieve our objective. It’s also healthy for the project. Within an integration, there are often multiple teams working on the same type task. Create friendly competitions and celebrate your victories to reward the hard work. Even when team activities aren’t always feasible with global teams and tight deadlines or budgets, it’s important to take care of your team. What else can you do for fun? Celebrate personal life events (birthdays, anniversaries, etc.) and funny competitions (pick the team member’s baby picture). There are lots of ways to help build the team atmosphere and have some playtime while you and your team work very hard.

Innovation and success sometimes come from thinking creatively and wondering ‘what if?’

Watch out for traffic.

We all remember the buddy system. Looking back, I learned two key lessons from that. Not only are cars moving along their own path without consideration for small children, but parents knew their child was a valuable resource to be protected at all times. Our project team members are the same. As leaders, we must ensure adequate planning is in place to avoid conflict between concurrent work streams. You may not find your project management office (PMO) equipped with a whistle and reflective vest, but like the crossing guard who helped you safely navigate after-school traffic, a good project manager will be the buddy you need to navigate a complex integration. Priorities will conflict, target dates will be missed. Centralizing communication through your PMO will ensure all messages reach appropriate stakeholders, enabling safe traffic control, reprioritization of key milestones, and preventing the project plan from becoming a carpool lane that never moves.

Be aware of wonder.

The world is an amazing place. In kindergarten, we were just starting to learn about the world around us. We were fascinated by it all and likely drove our parents crazy inquiring “why” everything was as it was. We wanted to learn, and we wanted to understand. Harness that wonder from your youth. As we noted earlier, successful integrations involve a process; use the proven strategies to bring direction and efficiency to multiple types of integrations. But don’t let process stunt your creativity. Innovation and success sometimes come from thinking creatively and wondering “what if?” It’s a delicate balance. Too much wondering can leave you in the clouds while the business moves forward. Wonder. Question. Challenge. But continuously be aware.

No doubt, we’ve all learned a lot since kindergarten. But we learned a lot in kindergarten, too. Will these pointers be all you need to know before starting a new integration project? Absolutely not. It takes a team of highly educated and experienced members who are dedicated to integrating the business and achieving the original value that spurred the acquisition. However, keep these ideas in mind as you embark on your integration, and in the midst of the integration, you will certainly improve your chances for a successful project and satisfied team members. Don’t forget to save some milk and cookies for us!

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