

Lessons from the Field

A Merger: Creating Capacity in a Resource-Limited Sector



**Community
Support
Connections**



Meals on Wheels and More

Acknowledgements

We're often asked about our merger. Did it achieve its intended objectives? Has it made a difference? Was it worth it? What did you learn? are amongst the many questions we've fielded over the years – in between 'getting the work done'.

We're very grateful to the Waterloo Region Resiliency Initiative for their support of this report, which enabled us to answer at least some of these questions within a framework that makes sense to us. We certainly would not have been able to complete this project without the dedicated time and expertise of the author, Marc Langlois.

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Volunteers, donors and funders have supported us unfailingly throughout our journey – you are the 'silent heroes' of this story.

Most importantly, we'd like to thank our clients – the reason we do the work we do – for sharing their feedback, both positive and constructive, on a day-to-day basis and through our evaluation processes. You help us make our services better – more responsive, more flexible, more helpful – each and every day.

We hope that this story is just the beginning of continued client focussed system change – change that will enhance our ability to respond to the needs of our friends and neighbours, enabling independence and dignity.

Sincerely,



Dale Howatt
Executive Director

Community Support Connections - *Meals on Wheels and More*
Enabling people to live at home with independence and dignity



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	5
Community Support Service Agencies	6
The Changing Face of Communities	7
Changes Afoot in the Community Support Services Sector	8
A Theoretical Framework	9
Maturity Phase	10
The Catalyst	11
Creative Destruction	12
Renewal Phase	13
Birth Phase	14
Leadership for the Back-loop Journey	16
Encourage Internal and External Links	17
Adding Structure for the Back-loop Journey	17
Collaborative Decision-making	18
Financing and Cost	18
Bring in Needed Expertise	19
A Snapshot of the Outcomes	19
Stronger Organizational Culture	20
Increased Capacity to Adapt and Innovate	20
Increased Operational Efficiencies	20
Increased and Improved Client Services	21
Increased Partnerships and Collaboration	21
Increased Visibility	22
A Summary of the Lessons Learned	24
CSC at a Glance	25
References	26
Appendix	27

Introduction

“There is all this capacity sitting with single and small multi-service organizations in the community support services sector.”

Ultimately this is a story of a merger executed to create capacity in a sector with very limited resources. It is also a story of creating an organization with a culture of innovation. The new organization formed from the merger managed to absorb, restructure and change practices in such a way that they greatly increased service delivery within their existing budget framework.

This merger of four community support service (CSS) agencies in the Kitchener-Waterloo region is used as a background to the ideas and concepts presented in this article. Taking a proactive approach, the four agencies involved proceeded with determination and vision. The vision was for the newly merged agency to be focused on integrated services. The agency managers wanted to offer more services to a wider range of people, and by combining resources, do an even better job of keeping clients independent and out of hospital longer (CSC, 2007). By the time the merger was complete three years later, they had improved their ability to serve clients significantly beyond what they had been doing as separate organizations.

Some argue that the merger was costly and unnecessary since an anticipated situation – the catalyst for the merger – never materialized. The executive directors (EDs) of the original four agencies – hereafter referred to as the ‘original four’ – anticipated a sweeping mandate by the provincial government for the integration of single-service community support services. Their anticipation of this mandate was fuelled by the advent of Local Health Integration Networks (LHIN) and locally generated reports. However, there was consensus among staff, board members, volunteers and clients that the merger of the original four enhanced organizational capacity and improved service for clients.

For the data and perspectives that informed this article the writer conducted twelve interviews with staff and volunteers that were involved with the merger.

Integration
Capacity
Innovation
Service

Community Support Service Agencies

In Ontario, agencies known as Community Support Services (CSS) provide home support services such as Meals on Wheels, Homemaking, Transportation and Friendly Visiting. Provincially subsidized, CSS agencies provide supportive care to older adults and adults with disabilities to help them maintain independence at home and in the community. CSS agencies are a vital link in the community care spectrum that helps thousands of people live more independently at home.

At the time of the merger there were 35 CSS agencies in the Waterloo Wellington region. Funding for the CSS agencies is made up of a combination of public funding, user fees, fundraising and support from individuals and foundations. The percentage of each of these funding sources varies from agency to agency depending on the number of clients served, the services provided and the origin of the agency. Some rely more heavily on public funding, others on volunteerism, fundraising and charitable donations.

Four CSS agencies merged to create Community Support Connections - *Meals on Wheels and More*. Their stories form the backdrop of this article. These original four agencies were: Meals on Wheels of Kitchener-Waterloo (MOWKW), RAISE Home Support Service for the Elderly (RAISE), Meals on Wheels and Community Home Support – Cambridge (MOWCHS) and the Kitchener-Waterloo Friendship Group for Seniors (KWFGS). The merging of the original four between 2005 to 2007 resulted in a new agency: Community Support Connections – Meals on Wheels and More (See Appendix).



The Changing Face of Communities

Individuals, families and organizations are all being challenged to adapt to complexities not previously experienced. There are considerable impacts at the community level we should be concerned about. There is a sense of disconnection in urban, rural and remote communities. Though the causes of the disconnection are many and complex, some are clear. For the urban worker, as an example, greater distances to the workplace and longer hours are reducing home to a place for sleep, more than anything else. Parents juggle work and home schedules or hire help to shuttle children to education and recreation programs that are increasingly structured, disconnected from family life and farther from home. And with our mobile work lives locating us away from friends and family, most do not have the familiar supports we once did.

The change in our communities has resulted in a growing specialist approach and professionalized culture as we deal with those in need. From early childhood education to homecare support for the elderly and everything in between, we are developing costly new programs at a pace that is unsustainable.

This is the challenging environment community support services are trying to adapt to. The reality is that they are facing increasing demands for services for seniors and adults with disabilities in their homes at a time when resources are decreasing. The demands in the environment are multiplied by changing demographics and limited resources at hospitals and care facilities, resulting in shorter hospital stays and decreased availability of service in long-term care facilities.

As one staff person of CSC explained, “Not only are CSS’s the ‘go to’ agencies for daily support of people in need of homecare, they are there for the many that require shorter-term assistance once they come out of hospital care.” Simple, practical, day-to-day supports that enable these people to live at home with independence and dignity are being sought from support service agencies. These are services that family and neighbours once helped with – ranging from help with meals, to visiting and lending a hand with chores.

“Not only are CSSs the ‘go to’ agencies for daily support of people in need of homecare, they are there for the many that require shorter-term assistance once they come out of hospital care.”

“Simple, practical, day-to-day supports family and neighbours once helped with.”

Changes Afoot in the CSS Sector

The government is responding in its own way to the changing environment in communities. In June 2005 the “Community Support Services Project” for Waterloo Region, Wellington, and Dufferin issued a report that included a number of recommendations that focused on, but were not limited to, showing areas of service gaps, client-centered service provision (Read, C. & von Schilling, S., 2005). The recommendation also spoke to the need to create structures for collaborative and integrated actions and planning. “The report has a section in there that suggests they [the LHIN] could make agencies merge.” It was the following recommendation of the report the original four agencies took to heart:

“Small CSS agencies, providing one or two community support services, explore opportunities for increased efficiencies and effectiveness in service provision through such means as co-location with other agencies, developing cooperative governance structures with other Community Support Service agencies and/or amalgamation.”

In the spring of 2006 the provincial government brought in an act that created LHINs across Ontario. The move was to bring together healthcare partners from the following sectors – hospitals, community care access centres, community support services, community mental health and addictions, community health centres and long-term care – to develop collaborative solutions for more timely access to services. With the advent of the LHINs came an increased focus on the concepts of collaboration and integration of services within the healthcare system in Ontario. This environment made the idea of amalgamation of CSS not only possible but in the government’s perspective, desirable (Handler, 12/2006).

A Theoretical Framework

To explore the case for mergers in the CSS sector as a way to build capacity, a theoretical framework known as the “Adaptive Cycle” will be used. It was created by C.S. Holling and a team of associates in 2002. The framework is an effective aid to analysis and communication about resiliency as it relates to the lifecycle of organizations. Resiliency is defined as “the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change, so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks” (Gunderson and Holling, 2002; Berkes et al., 2003). Resilience is about neither persistence nor change but is about balancing and integrating in a cycle that adapts to whatever the environment presents.

The Adaptive Cycle is communicated through a natural systems metaphor. Organizational change dynamics are categorized in the four phases of an eco-cycle: Birth (exploitation), Maturity (conservation), Creative Destruction and Renewal (mobilization). The Birth to Maturity cycle, described as the “front loop,” depicts the traditional projection of ongoing growth and development of popular management thinking. The Creative Destruction and Renewal Phases of the cycle are referred to as the “back-loop” (indicated by a perforated line in Figure #1).



Figure #1 “Adaptive Cycles” created by C.S. Holling and a team of associates, 2002

A resilient organization is one that is well adapted to its environment. As with a forest, it will have life unfolding simultaneously in each of the phases of the Adaptive Cycle – this concept is known as “patch dynamics” (Zimmerman, et al, 1998, p. 175). Any ecosystem with primarily one species represented is left vulnerable to disease and other natural or man-made interferences. Likewise, an organization that relies too heavily on any one strategy, program or decision process controlled by management, unnecessarily limits the range of possible responses to the environment. The objective is to draw out the diverse skills and wisdom in the organization or sector. Using the concept of patch dynamics and the Adaptive Cycle framework, the merger that led to the creation of CSC will be reviewed showing that when all was said and done, each of the original four achieved a new patch dynamic.

Maturity Phase

The mature forest is sheltered and quiet. Only dappled light filters through the canopy of trees to the sparse understory. Here, in the dim light, intricate relationships between plant species consume most of the resources leaving little to nurture new species. Likewise in the Maturity Phase of organizations, established policies, processes or programs take up the majority of the available resources. “Streamlining operations and allocating resources with more predictable returns is considered good management during the Maturity Phase” (Zimmerman et al. 1998, 173–75). In the forest the result is a high level of stored energy known as biomass that cannot be easily released. The equivalent in human systems is human and financial capital held back from surfacing in any number of ways, most commonly due to leadership without the wherewithal to empower others. One of the executive directors of the original four reported, “Nothing at our agency suggested it was a good time to merge, however, we knew we were sitting on a lot of resources.”

Organizations having cultures with aging practices out of pace with the fast-changing environment can die in the Maturity Phase. There are agencies in the CSS sector vulnerable to a slow death if they don’t soon adapt. Although there had been the usual inter-agency kind of communication among the various agencies in the sector and attempts to cooperate on joint initiatives, collaboration had been mostly informal and restricted by differing eligibility criteria and geographic/municipal boundaries (Handler, 2006). The administrators of these agencies are so occupied with their demanding day-to-day operations that reaching beyond their service and geographic boundaries to collaborate is a difficult stretch. Even with those agencies that merged to form CSC, some of that independence hung on. “For up to 2.5 years we did not feel connected. It was an us-and-them thing. I think we were working more against each other than together.” The difficulty with any one organization or a sector resting, or being trapped, in the Maturing Phase is that the ability to bounce back from the impact of a crisis or challenge, or to reverse a slow and steady decline, is hampered.

The Catalyst

There are moments-in-time when the environment presents the opportunity or need to consider dramatic change. In the CSC situation the change was a merger. With extreme and growing rigidity, mature systems become accidents waiting to happen – basically they are sitting targets. “The trigger might be entirely random and external – a transient dry spell for the forest, a difficult board member or in the case of the CSS sector, depleting resources, increasing demands for service and external pressures (Holling 2002, 45). As one board member of CSC put it, “There was a lot of nervousness, a lot of uncertainty related to what was going to happen, in particular to single-service agencies.” Another communicated the sentiments of most involved. “The advent of the LHIN forced our hand.” The 2005 final report of the Community Support Services Project for Waterloo Region, Wellington, and Dufferin left small single-service agencies feeling vulnerable and two of the original four were single-service agencies (Read, C. & von Schilling, S., 2005). “With the report indicating that it would be tough for single-service agencies to still exist, it was a natural fit for us to come together.” The catalyst to move into the Creative Destruction phase was upon them.

Creative Destruction

“What trees should be felled in order to let new life in?”

With what the leaders of the original four saw in the environment, they sensed it was time to act. It was this kind of proactive stance that prompted Holling to define the term Creative Destruction as the beginning of the back-loop cycle (indicated by a perforated line in Figure #1). Rather than fight disturbances, the wise leader will find ways to release energy and resources creatively and direct them towards new possibilities. One of the EDs involved commented, “We decided we would rather be driving the bus than be told how to drive it.” Rapid changes, multiple uncertainties and times of crisis typify the back-loop. The most common reaction of leaders is fear. One staff member from the original four spoke to this. “We were afraid of losing our identity to the bigger ones [agencies] in the merger.” A common reactionary strategy to the fear is to hire an autocratic leader to suppress the change and put a stop to the chaos. However, this is not what CSC chose to do. They managed most of the change by board/staff committees and they held a competition resulting in the hiring of one of the existing EDs.

“In destruction there is the potential for the release of new resources and creative energies.”

The Creative Destruction phase is a period for leaders to ask themselves, “What might their agency stop doing?” Or put another way, “What trees should be felled in order to let new life in?” In the case of the merger some of those “trees that fell” were staff that left the original four. Though no one was forced out of a job, some did choose to leave. That was to be expected. There are individuals who feel most comfortable in the culture of mature organizations with their sense of stability and security. When things move into Creative Destruction these same people can be uncomfortable with the sense of discontinuation and collapse. As one senior staff person of CSC put it, “It made an exit point for some.” Another also spoke of the changes. “I never believed it when I read somewhere about getting the right people on the bus and the right people off the bus. I was, ‘Yeah right, good luck getting the right people off the bus,’ but it just happened – amazing.” The simple lesson from nature is that change is a constant and that in destruction there is the potential for release of new resources and creative energies. People who thrive in crisis and new beginnings bring in the renewal. One staff member enthusiastic about the changes remarked, “I was quite excited. I’m a person of change.”

Renewal Phase

“The Renewal Phase that follows Creative Destruction requires that organizations excel in reflective learning - pausing to look around, listening and acting on immediate information.”

“It is a time for an appreciative or strength-based approach, responding to every crisis and concern as a potential opportunity.”

“Expect false starts.”

Once the merger was announced there was a long period of uncertainty as the complexity of the merger grew. It is one thing to talk about a merger but when it comes right down to it, organizations are made up of people and people have inherent needs and emotions. “There was a lot of uncertainty. There were suspicions on the part of the staff of the other organizations, and you know, different personalities, the whole gamut.” Understandably, the uncertainty led to worry. “They were worried about how their jobs would change and how things were going to operate.” For the smaller of the agencies there was an additional worry. “Is our focus going to disappear?”

The Renewal phase that follows Creative Destruction requires that organizations excel in reflective learning - pausing to look around, listening and acting on immediate information. It is a time for an appreciative or strength-based approach, responding to every crisis and concern as a potential opportunity. The call is to mobilize, to experiment and to expect false starts. “For a period of time it seemed that for every step forward we’d take one or two back.” It was in recognizing opportunities and experimenting that CSC excelled. Every change was viewed as an opportunity to restructure, to improve. The new organization added programs and partners to its matrix – some succeeded and contributed to its current capacity, while others failed. Each was an opportunity to learn, change and grow. “We flowed by the seat of our pants.” Another concurred, “There were lots of growing pains in the beginning.” The trial and error characteristic of this phase appeals to people who learn by doing: entrepreneurs and innovators.

The Renewal phase also presents great potential for frustration and mounting anxiety. “It was a bit overwhelming when I came over from my organization. There are so many more people here [CSC].” Another staff member of the original four commented, “There was a lot of tension for two years.” The balancing element is passion for making a meaningful social contribution in the community – this was a driving force at CSC. “Our heart is here for this work.” “It [the merger] was all about better service for the client.” “What I really liked was the enthusiasm of creating an opportunity where we could best meet the clients’ needs.”

Birth Phase

When an organization is steeped in conditions characteristic of the Birth phase there is a demand for delivery and productivity with an entrepreneurial sense of excitement. It is the period of start-up and exploitation of new ideas, expertise, knowledge and/or technology. At the time of this writing, approximately five years after the merger started, CSC is well into activity that is characteristic of the front-loop of the Adaptive Cycle, Birth to Maturity (indicated by the solid line in Figure #1).

Reflecting on an important experiment of integrating two Meals on Wheels services, a senior staff member from CSC shared, “We kept assuming that we couldn’t [integrate two services]. I asked if we knew for sure that we couldn’t. We did a pilot and lo and behold, we could do it.” During this phase things are in a forming stage, therefore strong, highly personal communication is critical. Roles need to stay flexible. “I’m in a new position and I love it. I went from management to front-line.” Depending on the level of buy-in, people adjust their role and make mutual adjustments as things begin to integrate.

“The merger was all about better service for the client.”



“The balancing element is passion for making a meaningful social contribution to the community - this was a driving force at CSC.”

Leadership for the Back-loop Journey

Organizations entering a merger are called on to adapt in response to new ideas and practices and personalities. The leaders at the helm can make or break the success of a merger. In the fast-moving journey of a merger, the role of the leaders is to remove barriers and identify opportunities for innovation. It was the will and leadership of the original four executive directors, their boards and a team of other volunteers, that carried the merger through complexity, fear and uncertainty.

An organization's ability to successfully adapt to new circumstances is directly tied to how engaged its human resources are in the current and imagined future of their organization.

With some CSC staff and volunteers finding the idea of a merger difficult, an autocratic leader will risk discouraging staff from seeking answers to the many questions that emerge. In a worst-case scenario, staff will turn against the merger and cause its failure. The effective leader during the back-loop will excel at listening, watching, connecting and directing all of the various pieces toward a common end. Popular McGill University author and researcher Henry Mintzberg describes the leader's role during this phase as, "not to preconceive deliberate strategies, but to manage the process of strategic learning, where novel strategies can emerge" (1998, pg. 208). If the leader listens carefully, he or she will unearth a wealth of opportunities to which staff will respond with passion and determination.

From the very beginning of the merger the approach of the leaders was an empowering one. Case in point, early in the process a joint visioning day was convened including all staff and some board members from each agency to create a shared vision and mission for the new organization. For the staff of the original four, listening, watching and connecting during that day helped guide the process thereafter. This empowering approach of the leadership continued throughout the back-loop phase. It was this kind of commitment that saw a committee of the new board pull together what became a critical meeting in the merger process.

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"The leaders role is to manage the process of strategic learning, where novel strategies can emerge."

When it was time to hire a new executive, all non-management staff were drawn together to tell the board what type of person they were looking for to lead the newly merged organization. The feedback garnered from that meeting guided and influenced both the process and decision-making of the search. “I think that move was light-years ahead of other people. That was a cutting-edge decision. It was appropriate and it was the most solidifying way to bring the staff together.”

“An organization’s ability to successfully adapt to new circumstances is directly tied to how engaged its human resources are in the current and imagined future of the organization.”



Encourage Internal and External Links

In the Reorganization phase of the merger it was important that the leadership team facilitated connections between staff and volunteers from the original four, and from the new organization, to external resource persons. These links were critical to breaking down the individualized services of the original four and reaching outside of the usual relationships within the CSS sector for new resources and knowledge. A primary strategy to create the internal connections during the merger was to facilitate opportunities for staff, volunteers and resource persons to exchange information, ideas and beliefs. Face-to-face meetings were convened throughout the merger on varied topics including, for example, solicitation of suggestions of names for the new agency. The staff were appreciative and enthusiastic about these forums. “The day was great, a lot of enthusiasm, it was exciting.” “There were a lot of times we were brought together so they could hear what we had to say.” “They really tried to keep us up-to-date and involved.”

“Expressing concerns leads to improved results.”

It is interesting to consider why it was that the original four EDs had the will to step forward while 31 others at that initial meeting about collaboration did not. Three of the four EDs from the merged organizations had established a connection through past positive working relationships. These relationships were critical to laying the groundwork for the leaders to take the first steps toward the merger idea. These original three executive directors also managed to reach across long-held beliefs about regional disparities to include a Cambridge CSS agency. The ED of the Cambridge-affiliated agency spoke about the issue. “The hardest part [of convincing the board] was because of the political environment. Cambridge always felt like a second-class citizen to Kitchener-Waterloo.” Her concerns were voiced regularly throughout the merger and resulted in an increased presence and programs in the Cambridge community as a result of the merger. Finally, the merger leadership reached outward to draw in decision-makers at the LHIN, foundations, individual donors and business leaders to help with the process. In this case there were business people on the board with first-hand experience with mergers who proved a very valuable resource.

Adding Structure for the Back-loop Journey

There are a number of limitations that can impair organizations from executing a successful merger, including: inadequate infrastructure, financing, and necessary time away from day-to-day operations to create a proper plan and unskilled and unengaged human resources. To build the necessary capacity, the leadership of the CSC merger imported and created additional supports including: external funding, a merger committee, sub-committees and legal, accounting and merger consultants. These primary elements of structure are discussed below.

Collaborative Decision-making

“The committee was the pioneering “space” from which to nurture a new culture of cooperative decision-making between the organizations entering the merger.”

For six months there was a four-person merger committee to deal with the merger away from the day-to-day staff operations and board business. The committee accomplished a great deal of work in a short amount of time. It was made up of one board member from each of the original four. The committee was the pioneering “space” from which to nurture a new culture of cooperative decision-making between the organizations entering the merger. This space carved out for the committee became a structure that allowed for the exploration of ideas. Though the committee kept a focus on the goal of improved efficiencies and client service, they were not interrupted by the day-to-day operations of the original four. It was as if the merger process had a temporary R & D lab to explore the idea.

“It was as if the merger process had a temporary R & D lab to explore the idea.”

The new culture that began to grow out of the merger committee was a cooperative one with a strong commitment to client services. In the words of one committee member, “We were a democratic group that all got along.” This culture helped encourage a strength-based approach focused on what was possible with the merger rather than what was not. There were other additional board sub-committees introduced to address governance, finance, human resources, fundraising, program and services and building/facilities. They, too, had a culture of cooperation and creative problem solving. “Throughout my time on the committee there was always a sense of opportunity to share, and things generally came to a consensus.”

Financing and Cost

When all was said and done, external resources of approximately \$300,000 (Merger Committee report, 2006) were added to considerable internal resources – both financial and human – to execute the merger. Funding to cover this cost was critical. As one Merger Committee member simply put it, “It wouldn’t have happened without them [the funders].” Searching vertical links in the domain – or looking through the entire hierarchy of the organization – was done to find and leverage the group of funders that included the Kitchener and Waterloo Community Foundation, the Lyle S. Hallman Foundation, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the United Way of Kitchener Waterloo and Area and Jim and Sue Hallman.

The funding was also approached as an innovative and collaborative process. Funders came together around a single table to identify which portions of the merger-related expenses they could support. CSC reported to the group as a whole, rather than separately to each individual funder.

Bring in Needed Expertise

Additional external supports were brought in to assist with the merger, including a lawyer, accounting and merger consultants, each with considerable experience guiding group mergers, and in particular, using due diligence process. Looking back, one senior staff member shared, “We certainly needed outside assistance.” Another member with his own extensive merger experience added, “The accounting leadership was fundamentally wonderful, as was the legal aspect. They [external firms] had both been through it before.” The merger consultants were involved in the mission, the values and vision work, the hiring process for the new ED, the naming of the organization, the salaries framework and a strategic plan. A consultant also took on the critical role of experienced facilitation of staff workshops to create the opportunity to constructively address staff ideas and concerns.

A Snapshot of the Outcomes

With the merger complete, CSC is now making every effort to reflect a patch dynamic strategy. They have maintained or improved core operational procedures that range from the database to driver routes, and are now collaborating with five other organizations to create a database hub. They hold on to some of the history and values they had as separate organizations but aren't afraid to experiment. As one staff put it, "I think a bit of that history of the way we have done things is really great to maintain even if we don't do things exactly the same way." CSC continues to be open to considering what aspects of their operation might require Creative Destruction while programs and practices continue to be introduced. "The merger has given us this big open door to provide so many more things." Following is a description of some of the primary outcomes.

Stronger Organizational Culture

"We are an organization that can learn now with loads of new capacity."

"There is a can-do attitude here now."

"My work is 100 per cent better since things changed."

Most feel that the culture at the new CSC is stronger in its capacity to learn and act than the culture any of the original four had. "We are an organization that can learn now with loads of new capacity." "There is a can-do attitude here now." "My work is 100 per cent better since things changed." "I like my job, I really like what I do; there is variety to my job." There is also a change that comes with new, younger staff who joined the team. "They keep me current." "They [young staff] bring such perspective, they bring a lot of new energy and they are willing to try and find new solutions or new ways to do things." There are some of the staff that miss things from their old agency, such as a soulful office space and getting to know all the staff well. However, they and other staff and volunteers seem quite happy with the changes. As one early naysayer reflected, "I was definitely thinking this [merger] was not necessary but now there is absolutely no us-and-them anymore – it is just us. Now we are one agency working together to serve the client. For us it is easy to see the improvements, and the clients know."

Increased Capacity to Adapt and Innovate

“With everyone asking questions and engaging in solution generation there is no option but to improve service.”

Creating a culture of innovation has meant encouraging everybody to ask, “How can we do this better?” “What are we seeing?” “What has changed?” “What can we do?” With everyone asking questions and engaging in solution generation there is no option but to improve service. CSC’s capacity to adapt to whatever the environment throws its way has grown. “We can see more and we are able to respond.” The healthcare professionals and clients are responding. “People see and know us more so we are getting more calls.”

Increased Operational Efficiencies

Every change since the merger has been viewed as an opportunity to ask what could be done differently. “What are our current strengths?” “Where do we need to backfill?” “What do we need now?” This has been particularly true with staff changes. The first few innovations to increase efficiency were met with concern and trepidation; now they are seen as a matter of course. The process of staff consultation discussed earlier underlies this process. With every new job description or shift in responsibilities, staff are asked to consider how their role interacts with the new job – and if there are any responsibilities that they would be willing or want to take on or change.

Increased and Improved Client Services

“Client numbers have increased 25.5% in four years.”

Since the merger, client numbers have increased 25.5 per cent in four years. Some programs are growing at 10 to 25 per cent year after year. CSC has added four new programs and several service locations, sometimes with new funding and sometimes by leveraging internal resources freed up through the Creative Destruction phase. There is broad agreement among CSC staff and volunteers that the merger has clearly improved the service they provide for their clients.

Increased Partnerships and Collaboration

CSC remains committed to partnerships and collaboration. It is leading and/or actively engaged in a multitude of collaborative initiatives ranging from system planning to shared programming and co-location. Since the merger, it has shared staffing resources with one partner, adopted two programs seeking a new home, integrated another small community-based program into its transportation options, shared space with Intensive Geriatric Service Workers, Big Brothers Big Sisters and PATER and will soon be acting as an information technology hub for five community partners in a shared assessment process. In their sector, CSC has raised the bar for collaboration and innovation. “We are recognized in the community as innovative and that we will take things on.” The new executive director of CSC reported, “The merger elevated our decision-making processes to a higher level.”

Increased Visibility

None of the original four had extensive internal communications expertise and neither did the newly merged CSC agency. However, the deficit was even more glaring with increased numbers and visibility. One of the first priorities, when opportunity allowed, was hiring external communications expertise. CSC did so initially by combining communications with fundraising. Listening and learning meant that it had to let go of some of its ‘sector specific’ ways of interacting with the media. It has since become the local ‘go to’ agency for almost everything seniors-related. An amplified media and social media presence has increased its client and volunteer numbers, and financial and in-kind support from the local community.



“Listening and learning meant that it had to let go of some of its ‘sector specific’ ways of interacting with the media. It has since become the local ‘go to’ agency for almost everything seniors-related.”

A summary of the lessons learned

Change

Change is not a single event but it can be driven by a single goal. Using a single structural innovation, in this case to form a merger in a resource-strapped sector, can create a culture of ongoing innovation and can continue to yield capacity. It is important to see change as ongoing and challenges as opportunities.

Challenges can be opportunities.

Communication

Asking the general staff team what type of ED they recommend for the new organization is a good example of exemplary leadership and the importance of internal communication. The inherent challenge is for the leadership to be prepared to listen and, if necessary, change the plan and/or perceptions based on what is heard.

It is critical to maintain open and continuous communication with staff and volunteers throughout a complex change process such as a merger. It is equally critical to maintain open and continuous communication to ensure the culture remains one that recognizes the importance of asking questions and listening to ideas and responses. Staff consultations on single, important decisions were augmented by weekly “idea hours” and regular opportunities to suggest how new ideas and/or positions can be integrated into current structure.

Leadership needs to be prepared to listen and, if necessary, change the plan.

Increased and regular communication with all stakeholders through electronic media was important during the merger and continues to be so.

Celebrating failures enables people and organizations to experiment and learn from what doesn't work.

Objectivity is particularly important when making sweeping and dramatic changes.

Celebration

It is important to celebrate and build on successes – and failures. Celebrating successes renews energy and focus. Celebrating failures enables people and organizations to experiment and learn from what doesn't work.

Expertise

The role of the external consultants was very important to the merger. External expertise is enhanced by objectivity – particularly important when making sweeping and dramatic changes. Leveraging external expertise on an ongoing basis can introduce new perspectives and change fundamental ways of doing things for the better.

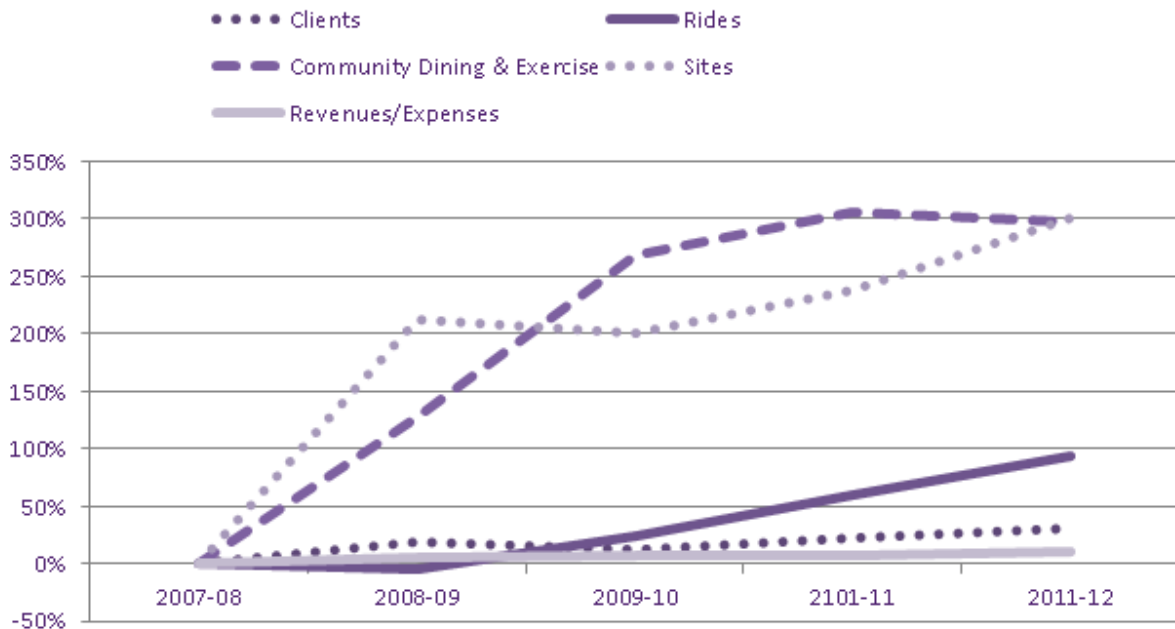
Having board members with experience with mergers was very helpful to the process. They brought new perspectives and an ability to focus on the “forest” when staff can become “lost in the trees.”

Assumptions

The importance of confirming funding assumptions in writing prior to engaging in merger activity was an important lesson from the CSC merger. In the eagerness to move forward, there is a vulnerability to interpret ‘support’ to mean more than it does in reality.

It was important that the CSC leadership test their assumptions about service delivery and in so doing voluntarily engage in limited Creative Destruction to free up additional resources.

CSC Enhanced Capacity



86,460 Meals on Wheels
 83,554 Care Coordination Calls & Visits
 41,112 Hours of Homemaking, Yard Work & Snow Removals
 19,803 Rides to Medical Appointments & Adult Day Programs
 10,743 Friendly Visits & Reassurance Calls
 6,482 Hours of Gentle Exercise
 2,979 Community Meals
 1,394 Crisis Intervention Calls & Visits
 Average Cost Per Unit \$10.23

3,633 Clients
699 Volunteers
70,407 Volunteer Hours
683 Donors

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Appendix

Original Four Organizations that came together to form ‘Community Support Connections - Meals on Wheels and More:’

1. Meals on Wheels of Kitchener-Waterloo (MOWKW)

Agency Profile: MOWKW provides hot and frozen meals, including a growing ethnic program, to residents of Kitchener and Waterloo and extending into Woolwich Township. It ensures adequate, appropriate and affordable services are delivered to eligible clients. Eligibility for this service includes, but is not limited to, clients with nutritional concerns, physical limitations or chronic illness. Meals are also available to frail clients and to those recently released from hospital.

2. RAISE Home Support for the Elderly (RAISE)

Agency Profile: RAISE provides services to eligible seniors at home with limited self-care ability and persons with disabilities who reside in the City of Kitchener with the following programs: Transportation, Home Maintenance, Friendly Visiting, Security Checks, Homemaking/Home Help and Client Intervention and Assistance Service (CIAS).

3. Meals on Wheels and Community Home Support – Cambridge (MOWCHS)

Agency Profile: Meals on Wheels and Community Home Support provides services to seniors, adults with special needs or those who are recently convalescing. The range of programs includes Meals on Wheels, Congregate Dining, Home Help, Home Maintenance, Reassurance, Security Check and Caregiver Support and Training. They do so in partnership with those in the community who share their goals. MOWCHS serves the City of Cambridge and also provides limited services in North Dumfries Township.

4. Kitchener-Waterloo Friendship Group for Seniors (KWFGS)

Agency Profile: The Kitchener-Waterloo Friendship Group for Seniors provides the services of Friendly Visiting and now, Caregiver Support and Respite, to clients living in the cities of Kitchener and Waterloo.

Community Support Connections - *Meals on Wheels and More*

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**Community
Support
Connections**



Meals on Wheels and More