

What Went Wrong In Iraq; From A Management Perspective

By Mitch Mitchell

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The war has come and gone in Iraq and the vaunted battle never really materialized. Yet here we are, months removed from the official end of the encounter, and things don't seem to be progressing one bit. If we view the situation in Iraq as if it were a business, one can find several factors that were overlooked, causing this "hostile" takeover of the business to, at this point, look like a miserable disappointment.

It failed because good management and business principles were not applied correctly to the process. Then again, it's hard to apply business principles to a combat situation; or is it? Let's take a look at the problem of Iraq as if it were one organization taking over another, because these kinds of events occur all the time in business. Let's see where things went wrong, and see what could have been done up front to not only minimize the potential, yet proven, dangers, but also show what can possibly occur now to fix the concerns as they presently stand.

Knowing what we know now, some of the failures are as such:

1. Rumors of the takeover were rampant, yet not with much detail, and the "employees" didn't have any time to adjust to what might be coming. Even in companies where employees may not like their present business structure, they will tend to have some loyalty to the entity they know, rather than the entity they don't know.
2. There was no consideration given to the "management" staff already in place. Even in a troubled company there is always talent within that organization, and usually someone knows about that talent and tries to find a way to reach out to that talent. It immediately lends some credibility to the incoming "regime" that they will definitely take some of the feelings and thoughts of those who are left into consideration.
3. There was no plan to deal with the instability of the employees who were left by the "takeover". One had to consider that employees who were floundering at a bad organization would feel rudderless and overwhelmed, and that at least a few of them would decide to take matters into their own hands and try to get "theirs", based on the lack of knowledge on what may be available for them if they just wait to see what those behind the "takeover" may have in store for them. The new management team never thought to equip their middle managers with any of the possible scenarios that might occur, which left them standing around watching utter chaos take control.
4. The new employees brought in from the new organization have no sense of what the past "employees" have been through. Even though the new "employees" weren't as numerous coming in

as the existing "employees", they were immediately given leadership status over the existing "employees", without knowing what they really were in store for. They were given technical training to handle the operations, but no leadership skills in how to work with people. In essence, they weren't trained to be "managers".

5. The new management team had no idea of how to communicate their ideas or plans to the existing "employees", nor the proper forum to do it. They had no plan for shoring up the infrastructure of the existing organization, which brought nothing but dissent from the existing "employees". Damage had occurred because of the "takeover", and though the new "upper management" team knew it was going to occur beforehand, they didn't take into account how much the existing "employees" were going to not only need those services, but were going to rely on the new "management" team to get things accomplished. There was a perception of the new "management" team based on the rumors before they ever showed up, and the "management" team was now at a loss to explain to the existing "employees" that they were not miracle workers. Those involved in the "takeover" didn't try to dispel any of the rumors that they would sweep in and take charge and fix everything, even when they knew there was a major mess that they had to get through first. The expectations may have been unjustified, but the "management" team and "board of directors" allowed those thoughts to germinate.

6. The new CEO had no practical experience in what was needed for the new overall organization, nor enough practical background in the "employee" structure of the organization that was "acquired". He had to be replaced pretty quickly by a new one, who hasn't proven to be any more effective than the previous CEO. Some companies never learn from their own examples and keep hiring ineffective personnel for the wrong reasons. In this particular case, the new overall organization needed a strong and charismatic leader, one who knows how to communicate a vision to the "employees" and the "managers", and is willing to sit down and listen to the concerns and thoughts of the existing "employees" to see if they offer ideas that are helpful to the overall operation.

7. The "middle managers" were brought into a bad situation, were unfamiliar with the layout of the land, unfamiliar with the particular "language" and office structure that already existed, weren't taught how to read the "reports" that were already being used, were allowed to have a false sense of security when none existed, and aren't properly trained to resolve the issue any other way than by applying a "marshal" law system, more for their own protection than those of the company.

Nothing says that every one of these steps would have worked perfectly in the real world, but if someone had looked at some of these before the "takeover" and had given them some credence, the "takeover" might have been much smoother, and ended up looking more like a "merger" of sorts. Looking at those seven items above, how could this situation have been handled better?

1. Rumors do nothing more than fester feelings of fear, as well as disseminate bad information. In the particular situation we're talking about, "memos" were circulated throughout the failing "organization", but you can't get any real information out by sending a memo around. In this particular case, knowing something about the mode of communication that took place, the "memo" did nothing to tell the "employees" what to do to protect themselves. Instead, it encouraged the "employees" to turn against their present management structure and be ready to embrace the new, without an understanding of the "employees" at all. Though it's hard to accurately communicate to someone who you don't have total direct access to, there must always be an attempt to put yourself into someone else's shoes and try to feel what you suspect they might feel. If you don't do that, you have no prospect to expect any long term success in relating to your employees.

2. You can't get rid of all the employees when things go bad. You also can't afford to get rid of all the managers. Some managers and employees may have to be replaced, especially if the events leading to their being dismissed were confrontational. But going into any situation, especially a new

situation, you have to realize that there must be some existing personnel, management or not, that you can rely on, that you must rely on, to help transitions go smoothly. If you don't think of the negatives as much as you think of the positives of change, you're going to get burned, and that's no good.

3. New managers brought into an existing organization without being told all the possible scenarios, good or bad, are in trouble. They don't know the personalities, and they're at a great disadvantage. They think they'll be embraced because they're new, and feel that everyone knew how badly things were running, when the reality is that the employees who are left may be out to protect their own interests. Why should they exhibit any loyalty or decorum to the new manager; they don't even know you yet. Managers need to have some skills to know how to decipher the character of their employees quickly so that they can devise ways to address their needs.

4. Mid level managers are often promoted or moved to positions because they were technically proficient. Any time you put a manager into an existing structure without proper people skills, they're going to flounder. Any time you put a manager into an existing structure without giving them any background on what was going on at the time, or what the processes are, they are going to fail. That's why it's always important to communicate as much information to those managers as possible, even if it takes bringing some of them in on the process. That's also why it's important to try to find existing management or employees who can help new managers to integrate themselves as quickly as possible.

5. Once the new upper management team took over, they needed to start having group meetings with all the existing "employees" to outline their thoughts and aspirations for the future of the "company", as well as listen to the thoughts and concerns of those who were left. Even if you have some background, you can't assume that everyone else will think like you because they're not where you're from. If you have a vision you must find ways to communicate it so that everyone will understand it; at least the majority has to understand, if not agree. What you don't have is the luxury of having those that do understand and possibly agree with you being a "silent" majority. Word is going to get out to the "press" or the "community" if it's loud enough and negative enough, and all that will do is undermine what you may be trying to do, even if it's all positive.

6. You see this kind of thing occur often in the business world. There are times when you can bring someone in because they're talented and give them the time to learn the specifics. Sometimes you have to bring in the right person for the job right off the bat, someone who can hit the floor running because that's what's needed. In this case, the person hired for the "CEO" position had a great resume, but nothing on the resume indicated that he was qualified for this particular situation. There had been a great to-do about the new "administration" from the "employees" perspective, so much so that when it didn't work, the entire operation looked like a failure, when in reality the overall change to the "corporate structure" was minimal. The extension of all of this is that the "board of directors" looks inept, and the "stockholders" are restless, because they don't see the positive outcomes that were initially promised. Even though making changes is always an option, one that everyone has to be ready for at all times, when issues are critical and image is crucial, you only get one chance to make a good first impression. Not that bad press can't be overcome, but it certainly doesn't help you get to your objectives any quicker.

7. If the organization uses data and information that managers are unfamiliar with, someone has to take the initiative and either bring them up to speed on that data or change the overall program to produce information that the managers are familiar with. Managers will never come close to being effective if they have no idea what they're looking at. If they aren't given the tools and education to be able to survey the land and watch for the pitfalls and "ambushes" that may lay in wait for them, they won't survive, and blame will ultimately rest with the upper management team. But that won't placate the manager who got caught in the firestorm that could have been prevented.

This isn't close to a complete list, but it's a start in looking at ways management in general can work to solve some internal problems. Everyone will know what's meant by the words that are in quotation marks, and should be able to relate it to everyday business practices. What I hope, though, is that everyone who reads this is flexible enough to put other words into their place, or replace words I didn't highlight with quotation marks at times, as they may see fit to interpret them. For instance, even though I picked on upper management and sometimes didn't use a quotation, the reality is that in some normal business situations it doesn't have to be upper management that failed to plan a process properly. If a middle manager or a director has supervisors reporting to them, or supervisors have team leaders reporting to them, within those confines the director or middle managers is, in effect, upper management.

The major points addressed here are communications, education, forethought, and shared knowledge. These are always critical for any manager when they're trying to lead others. If you can master these, or at least know how to address and implement them, you'll be on the road to your own personal success.

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