

Growth by Relationship and Growth by Acquisition Are the Same Muscle. Almost Nobody Trains Them Together.

The deal is never closed in the room. It is won months before anyone walks into it.



UNPOLISHED TRUTHS

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*Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war
then seek to win. — Sun Tzu, The Art of War (paraphrased)*

I spent a week once walking a client's operation before anyone on either side laid
the word contract out loud. No presentation, no proposal, no leave-behind folder with
our logo on it. I walked the floor with the person who actually ran the plant, and
what kept him awake, listened to him describe a supplier who had let him down
months earlier and never quite recovered the relationship, and left most days I
said very little and learned a great deal.

Six months later, when the commercial conversation finally happened, it took
minutes. Not because we were fast. Because there was nothing left to discover.
Everything a negotiation would normally have to uncover, the real constraints and
actual priorities, the number that mattered versus the number that only looked like it
mattered, had already been learned the slow way, in a week that looked, from the
outside, like *nothing was happening at all*.

That is not a sales technique. It is closer to reconnaissance conducted in good faith
and it works because of a fact almost nobody says out loud. **The room where the deal
gets signed is not where the deal gets won.** It is where everyone finds out what has
already decided somewhere else, weeks or months earlier, by whoever bothered to
understand the business before they needed anything from it.

The Room Where Nothing Actually Happens

You know the signing room. Everyone does, and everyone knows how convinc-

theatre is. Handshakes, printed copies, somebody's assistant bringing in coffee exactly the right moment. It looks like the decisive event. It is usually the *least important* meeting in the entire relationship.

The actual decision was made earlier, and quietly, by whether the senior person on your side had ever stood on the client's floor without an agenda. Clients can tell the difference, immediately and permanently, between someone who showed up to understand their problem and someone who showed up to solve it before they finished describing it. The first earns something durable. The second earns a solution that a competitor can undo within a year with a slightly better number.

And here is the part that gets missed even by people who understand all of the above. **The team that has to deliver on what gets promised in that room is rarely the team that built the relationship which made the room possible.** Somebody did the work of unglamorous groundwork. Somebody else, in the same organisation, inherited the commitment without the context, and is expected to execute a promise they did not hear being made. That gap, between what was understood at the top and what actually reaches the people doing the work, is where most commercial relationships quietly start to fail, usually around month four, usually described afterward as a communication problem, which it is, in the same way a bridge collapse is a gravity problem.

The room where the deal gets signed is not where the deal gets won.

The Acquisition Version of the Same Mistake

I want to take this somewhere that will look, at first, like a different subject entirely.

I have also sat in the other kind of room. The one with the press release drafted

advance, the legal teams satisfied, the valuation defended, the handshake photographed for the internal newsletter. An acquisition, closed. Two organisations now *technically* one.

And I have sat, some months later, in the considerably less photogenic room where somebody finally asks why the two companies are still behaving like two companies. Different systems that were meant to be reconciled in phase two. Different departments with different rights that nobody actually harmonised, because the org chart said they had been combined and nobody checked whether authority had. A procurement function in one business still negotiating separately from a nearly identical procurement function in the other, because integrating them was scheduled for a quarter that kept quietly moving.

The deal closed. The organisations did not merge. Those are two different events. The distance between them is exactly the same distance as the one in the story where the promise was made at the top, by people with genuine authority to make it, but the thesis that made complete sense in the room where it was agreed. Nobody the unglamorous work of translating that promise into how two operating models actually behave when they meet each other on an ordinary Tuesday. The acquisition looks complete on paper for years while remaining, in every practical sense, two companies wearing one badge.

The Same Muscle, Trained Separately

Most organisations staff these as entirely different disciplines. Relationship building lives with commercial and sales. Acquisition integration lives with corporate development and a consulting firm hired for eighteen months and then quietly released. Almost nobody in either group notices they are solving the identical problem at a different scale.

Whether it is a single client relationship or an entire company being absorbed by another, the question is always the same one. Does the promise made by who was in the room survive its translation into what the people who were not in the room actually do, on an ordinary day.

That translation is not glamorous work. It rarely appears on a slide with a growth arrow on it. It looks like walking a floor before there is anything to sell, and it is like sitting with two operating teams line by line until their decision rights actually match their org chart rather than merely resembling it. Almost nobody trains to do both, because almost nobody has noticed they are the same training.

Growth by relationship and growth by acquisition fail for the same reason. A promise made by whoever was in the room never reached the people who had to keep it.

I think about that week on the plant floor more often than I think about the negotiation that followed it, because the negotiation was the easy part. Anyone reasonably competent could have closed that particular room in forty minutes; the real work was already done. The harder skill, the one that rarely earns a line in an org chart, is the discipline of showing up early enough, and humbly enough, that by the time the room finally happens, there is almost nothing left in it to decide.

Cassie, my 110-lb rescue dog, has never once cared what was promised in any negotiation that was not physically standing in front of her. She evaluates every new arrival to this house the same slow, deliberate way, several visits of careful sniffing and cautious distance before she decides whether a person is who they claimed to be at the door. She has never been wrong. She does not extend trust because someone announced themselves persuasively on arrival. She extends it because, over several encounters, behavior

word turned out to be the same thing.

She has never sat in a boardroom.

She would recognise the entire argument on sight.

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