

## **CYLINDERS OF EXCELLENCE**

*(Aka SILOS)*

Silos in the workplace are a common phenomenon. And while most of the articles written about organizational silos focus on the negative, it's useful to recognize that silos do provide benefits – they encourage clear focus on the particular responsibilities of a business unit and help ensure that work goes forward and specific jobs get done. And there are times when a singular, laser focus on achievement of an important outcome is a necessity requiring a siloed effort.

However, when silos become standard business practice or an integral part of organizational culture, they can also sacrifice potential benefits and diminish the potential of collaborative efforts and coordination. In addition, clients and important stakeholders may become frustrated by needing to go from one department to another to get answers or help and may experience (and describe!) your organization as bureaucratic and uncoordinated. When silos become an obstacle to effective customer service or to attaining break-through business goals, there are a number of questions to ask and a number of approaches to consider.

First, the questions: why do silos develop and what perpetuates this way of working? It's important to acknowledge that there are at least two kinds of silos because effective solutions depend on understanding the cause. The first kind of silo can be described as intentional; and the second, for want of a better term, can be called accidental.

Intentional silos develop when people believe they have something to protect – turf, information, reputation, rewards or time – and see little or no benefit in, or reward for, cross-functional communication or collaboration. In the case of intentional silos, the organization in question may have a “strategic plan” but success in achieving the goals contained in the plan can be achieved by single leader teams with discrete business unit goals. Overarching organizational goals are often nebulous and aspirational and don't demand cross-functional efforts to achieve them. If hard-working staff who are typically pressed for time, believe they can meet or exceed expectations by relying on the people and resources close at hand, there is little reason to expect them to reach across functional boundaries.

And, in many instances, senior management is complicit in encouraging silos by focusing on rewards and recognition for individual contributors, by treating mistakes harshly or publicly, by lack of transparency, poor cross-company communication and by not placing a value on internal collaboration, communication or coordination in their evaluation of managers and staff. If KPIs are narrowly focused and boundaried by work unit production or outcomes and if communications from the top are primarily vertical in nature, this sends a clear

message about cultural norms and “how things are done around here”. Bright, competent staff quickly figure out that there is no real incentive for focusing on internal customers other than the management hierarchy, or for exploring the uncertain value of cross-functional collaboration so they stick to their knitting, rely on their business unit colleagues and on the priorities set by their manager.

Unintentional or accidental silos are less complicated and are typically the consequence of geographic isolation combined with no ready or regular access to other business units, to broader organizational forums or to mission reminders. While this kind of silo is easier to address and overcome because staff may not be intentionally protecting information, work products or turf, the results of accidental silos are often identical to those that are more consciously adopted.

One of the most challenging situations I faced when I became COO was the number of free-standing ‘circles of covered wagons’ that existed in the organization and the astonishing number of cherished beliefs individual business units had about each other. I certainly bore responsibility for some of them. As I dug deeper into a new role, I was reminded of the caution that, “it ain’t what you don’t know that will kill you; it’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so”. There was a history of management affection (and reward) for ‘cylinders of excellence’, and an unfortunate conviction that one way to highlight one’s excellence was to point out deficiencies elsewhere. There was no shortage of incredibly skilled staff members but, as noted in something I read at the time, “individual brilliance can lead to collective stupidity”.

The fact of the matter is, silos encourage localized, disconnected decision-making and enhance the likelihood that, “anything that can go wrong, will go wrong at the worst possible moment over and over again”. (Murphy’s Law). The janitor at NASA who responded to the question, “What’s your job”, by saying, “My job is to put a man on the moon”, probably represents an unrealistic fantasy for those who are committed to increasing internal communication, coordination and collaboration. But the chances of silo development can be reduced and the continuation of existing silos can be addressed by several sustained and intentional practices. It’s important to recognize and accept the fact that these practices need to become part of the culture of the organization – not a one-time effort or employed only when silos produce undesirable consequences.

### *Getting to Know You*

In *Achieving Excellence*, we focus in the early days on ‘story’, starting with the story of I, the story of Us and the story of Us Now. Creating an organization-wide forum where every staff member shares his or her story of I, can be a remarkable experience. Several AE grads have done this and report that it has had a huge impact on their staff and established sincere mutual respect and understanding that prevailed long after the exercise. They’ve reported that the exercise gave staff a sense of their colleagues’ history and motivation as well as their commitment to the

organization's mission – not the kind of information that is typically shared in casual conversation.

#### *Mission Reminders*

In the nonprofit world, many staff are drawn to an organization because of its mission. Nonetheless, we are all subject to becoming buried in the weeds, distracted by organizational politics, work project anxieties or mixed messages. Periodic staff meetings where the focus is not on the immediate work, but rather on the challenges faced by the constituents the organization is dedicated to, can remind people that they are all there for the same reason – and can help transcend the value placed on functional boundaries.

#### *Intentional Management Strategies*

There are times when single-leader teams are critical. But according to Doug Smith, in *The Discipline of Teams*, there are also, in every organization, the opportunities for real teamwork – i.e., the desired outcome can't be achieved without exceeding the sum of individual goals. Managers can powerfully affect cross-functional collaboration by establishing meaningful goals or projects, requiring the involvement of multiple functional units, requiring mutual as well as individual accountability and the achievement of outcomes that are mostly the result of collective or joint effort.

Managers need to walk the walk. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that reflect the priority (and the expectation) of cross-functional efforts and collective products send a very clear and tangible message. Performance evaluations that assess staff effectiveness in working across boundaries and functions and ensure that their success in doing so is part of regular feedback (and as meaningfully rewarded as other performance elements), also establish this way of working as an intentional part of the organization's culture.

Another critical indicator is how the CEO and his/her E-Team communicate across the organization. If communication from the top is most often vertical, a standard is established about "who talks to whom", and hierarchy is reinforced as a value. And the message can – and is - often dissipated or lost if, for whatever reason, managers down the line elect not to share it with their direct reports (a much more common occurrence than executive management realizes).

#### *Reinforcing Best Practice and Regularly Asking Questions*

Collaboration means aligning goals and resources with others in real time to achieve agreed upon outcomes. Ron Ashkenas in HBR, describes this as mapping an end-to-end work plan that achieves a key goal by creating a critical path identifying what each collaborator or business unit needs to contribute. All collaborators need to be invited to make adjustments to the plan and to make a solid commitment to outcomes and deadlines. This kind of collaboration across organizational functions can reap huge benefits for an organization when everyone realizes the value of the outcomes achieved. Part of the job of Executive management is to support,

acknowledge and applaud this work where it occurs, conveying a desire to make this more of a rule than an exception.

When you are considering strategies to break down or discourage work silos, there are a number of questions you should consider:

1. What caused silos to develop?
  - Silos develop over time not overnight. It may have started before your time. Were there rewards or recognition for working this way? Were there disincentives for cross-functional consultation or collaboration?
2. What about now?
  - Is there anything you are doing/not doing that perpetuates peoples' conviction that this is the best or the safest way to work? Public criticism? Siloed goals? Rigid structures? Vertical communication?
  - What have you tried so far? What seems to have helped? What hasn't?
3. Who seems most invested in this way of working?
  - What "works" for them; what rewards are they seeking or getting?
  - Are they encouraging or confirming fears or assumptions others have in resisting collaboration across business units?
  - Considering their incentives/motivations, what are opportunities to send and reinforce a different message?
4. Is there a leader/business unit that could set an inspiring example for others? How might you initiate, encourage, publicly support and recognize that effort?

In exploring with staff where collaborative efforts are likely to be most valued and valuable, there are several questions to ask of them that can help identify promising opportunities (For obvious reasons it's wise to avoid language like "obstacles", "stonewalling", "information hoarding"):

1. What priorities does your work unit have that don't seem to be aligned with the work of others?
2. What would help other units understand the importance of your priorities?
3. What information/intelligence do you have that could be useful to other work units?
4. What information are you not getting from others that would be helpful to you?
5. In what areas do you believe greater collaboration would be beneficial to the organization?

None of this is magic and there is no single strategy that is likely to "fix" the challenges presented by organizational silos. But each of these approaches if employed consistently has the potential to make a meaningful difference.