

Break Silos and Change the Game

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Abstract

The article explores the creation of productive work environments if silo thinking is managed well. Various case studies were examined to understand how successful companies were disrupted at various levels due to silos. Today's global work world requires an even more collaborative style of functioning where knowledge and ideas should be exchanged easily for success. Silo thinking can be one of the biggest obstacles and a threat to co-operative working if not recognized early. Research into various team handling roles showed the gaps due to silo thinking and I have prescribed some ways to overcome silo thinking and change the game. These methods are a) Facilitative conversations, b) Create a shared goal, c) Build collaboration and inclusive methods, d) Customer focus and transparent communication, e) Build culture awareness and sensitivity, f) Understand motivations of teams & measure progress. Breaking silos may seem like a difficult task but if dealt expertly can help nurture trust and a competitive work environment.

Key Words: Silo thinking, Collaborative, Competitive, Productive, Trust, Shared

Easier said than done?

Many of us would have got caught in this game of silo thinking, a classic example of does our right hand know what the left is doing, or does it even care to find out? Something similar to Nokia's fall from the top of the smart phone pyramid? How did that happen? The silo thinking that existed, both amongst its top and middle managers ripped apart Nokia's business supremacy. The top managers were temperamental and focused only on meeting their quarterly targets rather than collaborate and explore the fall in revenues. Whereas, the middle managers, were either silent or passed on hyped up information to the top managers. In six years' Nokia's market value declined by 90% and they were overwhelmed by competitive forces. If not for the silos that

the various internal teams were caught in, they could have understood better, about the various possibilities. And most importantly, what to do about it.

Let us explore what silo mentality is and ways to minimize it in any organization.

The word silo is derived from the Greek word-'Siros', 'a pit for holding grain'. Unlike the silos, farmers use, to separate different types of grain, the organizational silos that separate employees are seldom as harmless. A silo mentality develops, when units, divisions and departments fiercely guard information and ideas rather than share them. People may work hard but in isolated silos. Organizational silos can be like fortresses within any company and

eventually cause deep problems that might not be noticed until the damage is done.

Is there a way we can overcome silos? The points given below can help us take care of silo thinking and collaborate for mutual benefit.

Be Facilitative rather than a dominating style of functioning: It is an advantage for leaders to be in facilitative mode while discussing as teams & customers can be managed well. In dominating conversations, people would respond by being defensive and not part with information or co-operate. This could even impact any organization's bottom-line, as it did for a billion dollar project. John, a team leader played a key role in bridging the gaps between the customer facing teams and the backend team she led. The team, a mix of mainly senior employees, just shared knowledge and assumed that the backend team would know how to proceed after the handover from the US shift. Whereas in the backend team chaos and confusion existed, as the team had no clue what action to implement. Both the teams were content in their silos and even vented their complaints about each other during weekly calls. This impacted the customer and they were displeased. John stepped in and set expectations with both the teams and explained the larger picture. His facilitative discussions effectively helped in minimizing silos and improve team productivity.

Create a common vision: A shared goal conveys the benefits gained to all teams involved. This reduces the gap between management and employees and helps to build co-operation and collaboration by

communicating effectively. Create cross functional teams that understand and live by the common goals. Leaders would have to engage, break down internal walls of isolation, be change agents and reward collaboration. Silos could be effectively managed if such teams had a mix of task & relationship oriented leadership styles as recommended in the book, "Harvard Business Review on Collaborating Across Silos."

Build collaboration and inclusion: Projects should be designed creatively to encourage inclusion and present them as problems to be solved. Though, people fear that inclusion may lead to confusion and lessen productivity, such efforts should be encouraged & rewarded. When these issues are shared with the entire organization, the idea is not only to seek feedback but also to proactively explore if people have different ideas on issues. When we collaborate like this, we enhance each other's work and create something impressive as groups rather than as an individual. Some of the processes like Crowd sourcing primarily go outside the silo & collaborate to get unique ideas, knowledge and skilled resources.

Customer focuses and share relevant information: Deal with operational silos by building in customer loyalty through transparent communication and not just getting stuck in internal issues. Convey key information to the entire organization to help teams understand how their actions and work planning impact the bottom-line of the organization. Though changes like customer reorganization may also be frequent, focusing on customer success and

transparent communication can break silos and build trust easily.

Build culture awareness and sensitivity:

The inability to adapt to different cultures could lead to silos. Hence it makes a lot of business sense to build sensitivity and have people in teams who are aware of the technological, political & geographical disruptions around. Interdepartmental collaboration across different geographies is a reality of today. We would need to be aware of each other's different skill sets, different cultures and areas of focus. Training teams on engaging with each other regardless of the language barriers, cultural differences or even personality types will help bridge gaps between co-workers. They would not hesitate to be appreciative of different cultures they need to work with and isolated cultural silos would be a thing of the past.

Motivate, Execute & Measure: Once the common goal is established, the focus then needs to be on understanding motivations of teams and individuals for proper execution. A good leader would need to study what motivates people, i.e. common interests, individual investment in growth, positive words of encouragement and how to communicate it to a wide range of audience. These tactics would definitely discourage the 'it's not my job attitude' and nurture

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team work and productivity. Once goals are defined for team, then it needs to be measured. The leadership team can define the timelines for completion of goals, benchmarks for success and delegate specific tasks & objectives. Regular scheduled meetings would hold people accountable for the tasks entrusted. Teams would definitely thrive with this kind of constant reinforcement and motivation to deal with silos well.

The 5 steps mentioned above have helped John to break silo thinking and be a game changer for his team and organization. They could infact help everybody in any organization to build trust and nurture the best ideas by appreciating diverse perspectives.

There is also an interesting viewpoint that silos are not bad if they are 'expressed' often. Silos by themselves do not create problems, the mentality that comes along with them does. Collaborative discussions can make up for a lack of sharing culture that withholds information in a company. Working in consensus and seeking advice before key decision making can hold teams together and encourage a natural environment of transparency. Breaking silos is not an easy task for any organization, but avoiding them will cause bigger harm to the employees and the organization.

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