

ENTERPRISE

ENGAGEMENT ALLIANCE

Breaking Down Organizational Silos

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INTRODUCTION

Every organization, no matter how forward-looking it believes itself to be, has silos. It's a business paradox that can stop real change in its tracks if not recognized and given proper consideration in any plans that affect the enterprise.

Taking that first step to break down silos is often the hardest because they are not always readily evident. After all, silos have a purpose, which is why they exist in the first place. There are the obvious departmental silos such as Human Resources and Legal. These sections of an organization have very specific job functions that can be unlike others. The sharing of information isn't only unnecessary in some cases, but prohibitive as well. Having this type of information restraints can be considered a silo. But for the sake of this chapter, the silos we're referring to are the people of cross-functional departments that have a need and/or desire for joint partnership to meet objectives or realize success on various initiatives.

Altering a company's core DNA to become more customer-focused sounds like a no-brainer. Many would say this has always been the case. But let's look at it from another point of view. At your company, is the customer experience just as important as the sale or the product? Does your Customer Service or Technical Support department get the same amount of "air time" as Sales or Engineering? Is the success of one interdependent on the other? Intuitively, you may believe that it is, but if your company has built up multiple silos over the years, it would be very difficult to understand why or how.

There are five basic steps that can prove successful in breaking down such silos:

1. First, do your homework. Talk to people. Understand their struggles and their successes. Learn their business objectives; they're likely very similar to your own. By showing a genuine interest in what's important to them, you're investing in them and, more importantly, building a relationship.
2. Look for what's already there. Is there something you already know or have discovered in these "interviews" that will help another department with a challenge they're facing? Be the catalyst in bringing them together.
3. If you've managed to loosen the foundation of the silo by building these relationships, don't leave it alone. Stay visible and relevant by communicating often.
4. Attention to detail is important. Credibility is essential to keeping a silo from being resurrected. If you don't know or understand the facts, find out or get help.
5. Show them how it will help them. Just telling someone how important something is usually isn't enough. For businesses, it's often about the money, but not always. Whatever it is, show them the benefits of tearing down the silo and letting you in.

BUILDING TRUST

If there's one thing above all else that's required to start breaking down organizational silos, it's building a relationship. The trust that comes with a strong relationship is what allows you to have a voice in a world where you may not have the expertise or experience specific to that department or function.

You don't have to be a coder or electrical engineer or talk "geek" to have a business relationship with Engineering. You have to have trust. But as with every relationship, trust is hard to earn – and even harder to keep. It's true that trust can build over the years, but if you don't have years to cultivate the relationship to that level, there are other ways to weaken the walls of the silo and to keep that relationship strong.

BECOME AN INFORMATION BROKER

We've all likely heard someone talk of the "quick win" or the "low-hanging fruit" that offers a quick and easy solution or is easy to implement. Now take that idea and grow it. All of the low-hanging fruit that's plucked at the right time will make up a bountiful harvest.

Remember that a silo is a protective barrier, and in business it's the people in a department or functional group that comprise that barrier.

Do the same within your organization. Look for information that would be helpful to another part of the company. And don't limit yourself to finding a problem with a solution that can be implemented or a process that can be changed. Information is just as powerful and can help someone else come up with that improvement opportunity. By sharing any and all information that's germane, you're contributing to the relationship with that department.

MAKE SURE IT'S RELEVANT

Another part of building a solid relationship is communication. Silos weaken with intentional focus, but neglect will allow them to fortify, and you may find yourself starting from square one again.

Communicating at regular intervals will help strengthen the relationship, as long as it's relevant. Relevance is critical to the success or failure of your communication strategy. Sending out trivial information is more likely to hurt the relationship than if you hadn't sent anything at all. Pertinent information should be shared as often as necessary, but don't waste people's time. Uninformative and unsolicited meetings, phone calls, or emails are just as annoying as telemarketing calls while you're having dinner.

A critical piece of your communication strategy is to ensure your information, insights, and feedback are accurate and fact-based. Having the type of relationship that ensures silos stay down requires making sure your attention to detail is always evident. Making careless mistakes can damage the relationship and the trust you've earned. That's not to say that an honest mistake will void what's been built up, but your creditability may be at stake if it happens too often. One way to help circumvent mistakes is to ensure you have a clear understanding of the information you're providing.

REINFORCE THROUGH VALUE

Now that you've begun to replace the framework of the silo with a solid relationship-based foundation, it's time to seal the deal, so to speak. By this time you should have a good understanding of what's important to a particular functional group or department. Make it a priority to understand what you bring to the table and how it will benefit them. Be concrete and realistic. Show them the impact to them.

Maybe it's sales leads; maybe it's insights into a potential marketing campaign; a customer profile on your website usage. Whatever it is, deliver it in a way that enables your audience to draw a specific conclusion. You shouldn't have to lead this horse to water; it should be thirsty enough to go there on its own.

BUILDING A NEW FOUNDATION

Remember that a silo is a protective barrier, and in business it's the people in a department or functional group that comprise that barrier. It's effective for those that are in the silo, and thus resistance to breaking the silo down is something that you'll have to take into account.

By showing interest and being an active participant in their business, you can start to break the silo down. Through relative and timely communication, you'll continue to chip away at the walls. It won't happen overnight, and it won't happen with every person that makes up the silo. Like a wrecking ball tearing down a building, making strategic strikes to the walls will bring the entire building down over time.

Building a new relationship in its place is just as important. By ensuring your information is meaningful and accurate, you build the trust that will help cement the relationship. Showing the value or benefits of the relationship will strengthen that bond.

Going back to our earlier statement about the importance of customer experience at your company, we can start to answer those questions posed if you have clear line of sight into what's important to another department and what are part of those success measurements. With the silos down and relationships built up in their place, when change is needed it'll be a joint effort. The benefit of the relationship is two-way. You have more people working with you, and the chances of success are much greater.