

Smash Silos and Build Bridges

Break down silos within a company with these networking strategies.

By Wendy Terwelp ■ October 2018

“**That’s not my job.**” “That’s not my department.” “Our department’s always done it this way.” “Why should I tell you?”

If these phrases sound familiar, you’ve likely encountered the silo effect. The silo effect is a mindset where some departments or business units don’t share information or collaborate toward a common goal for the good of the organization. Silos can cause project delays, mistrust, and toxic work environments.

But that doesn’t mean you are powerless against silos. By understanding three causes of the silo effect, you can pursue strategies to break the silos down.

Lack of common language

According to a Clear Company survey, 86 percent of the employees and executives who were polled pointed to ineffective communication and a lack of collaboration as reasons for workplace failures. When departments don’t align goals, language, and messaging, it leads to confusion, which subsequently leads to inaction. People aren’t sure what to do, whose strategy to follow, who’s responsible, and what specific outcomes management wants to achieve.

“The reality is that in many cases, both departments are saying the same thing; they get hung up on what they call it, which causes frustration. I also feel it contributes to information withholding, which can derail and delay a project,” says Jennifer Mueller, vice president and privacy officer for Wisconsin Hospital Association Information Center in Madison.

Solution: Create common language and messaging, along with facilitating in-person meetings between departments. This can alleviate communication barriers and build trust. For instance, videoconferencing, enterprise social networking, or other communication platforms can break down miscommunication among global teams by providing face-to-face and voice-to-voice communication.

“Part of communicating effectively is to focus on the conversation, ask questions, make eye contact,” says Bill Randquist, director of sales and marketing at Harbor Packaging in San Diego, California. As such, be sure to have a plan prior to meeting, and focus on the person—not the mobile phone, tablet, or laptop—during the conversation.

To ensure common language and messaging, Mueller recommends spending time “discussing and learning each other’s ‘language.’” She also recommends having people work out their issues. “They tend to discover they have more in common than originally thought ... they just approach the situation from different perspectives,” she notes.

Poor leadership

This comes in a variety of forms, from leaders providing unclear goals and expectations to lack of communication. And it can cause a toxic work environment. According to a study noted in Stephen Covey’s *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*, which surveyed 23,000 employees, only 37 percent reported that they clearly understood what their employer was trying to achieve and why.

Solution: Communicate a common goal for the organization to unify and motivate teams.

Randquist says, “I encourage my sales and design teams to sell as hard internally as they do to the client/prospect base. Whether it’s customer service, design, finance, or operations, you need to build a reputation of being polite, professional, helpful, interested, and committed to the mission. You can lose your reputation (trust) in buckets and gain it back a drop at a time.” He adds that you should help each department leader understand how important she is to executing the goal and that the company and team are counting on their leaders. “Recognizing people for good work is essential. And it doesn’t need to be expensive,” he explains.

Janet Agnello, executive vice president of HR at QPS Employment Group in Brookfield, Wisconsin, agrees. “I am a fan of daily communication in short conversations, such as five-minute huddles. These communication moments should highlight whether we are winning or losing, how we might need to course correct, and should always include ‘shout-outs’ for work well done,” she says.

Disconnected decision making

In this scenario, staff are making decisions based on their own situation or requirements, without considering other departments or corporate goals.

Solution: Set a strategic focus and vision to reduce duplicate efforts or incomplete work. Agnello says she and her executive team established a strategic direction to guide the next three years at QPS. This includes engaging next-level leaders in designing strategic initiatives, establishing key metrics, and instituting regular communication. “In addition, we are embarking on a total rewards strategy to tie individual/team performance into business performance,” she notes.

Simply stated, building bridges through strategic vision; focus; and clear, consistent communication among management and employees throughout the organization gets things done.

“When people are communicating well, it is just a fun place to work,” Mueller says. “Information flows naturally, and no one takes offense to a request or a suggestion. Each department ‘walks a mile in the others’ shoes,’ and they learn a great deal more about the end goal than they ever thought they would.”

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