

Dealing with unexpected change? Break down silos - first.

To stay competitive in the face of our global pandemic disruption, many companies must rethink and retool their offerings and operations. This kind of agile transformation, however, requires a collaborative effort from all parts of the organization, no matter how different their processes, systems, and cultures have been in the past.

The value of horizontal teamwork is widely recognized. Employees who can reach outside their silos to find colleagues with complementary expertise learn more, sell more, and gain skills faster. The work I have done with organizations across every industry has shown that firms with more ***cross-boundary collaboration*** achieve greater customer loyalty and higher margins. As successful change hinges more and more on interdisciplinary cooperation, digitalization transforms business at a breakneck pace, and globalization increasingly requires people to work across national borders, the demand for new ways of thinking, doing and leading continues to rise.

Most large companies have divisions, or even groups and functions within divisions, that operate in silos. This can be for good reason; in the knowledge economy, jobs often require that professionals work with people who possess similar professional skills to fulfill specific mandates. Silos can exist to harness knowledge-based skills, or specific job functions, or they can be geographic. In many industries, silos are vital to productivity.

But when organizational transformation is needed, silo-mindsets impact that the very parts of your company that must work together are unaccustomed to doing so, and even unable to communicate with one another because they are culturally misaligned, or inherently territorial. These problems can complicate change efforts, delay new client offerings or derail delivery of their benefits.

During these times of significant change and volatility, when organizations must be agile, silos can be stubborn obstacles to creating a more effective path to growth and profitability. Here are the ***most common roadblocks to change silos create*** and recommended solutions to ensure silos do not hold up transformation.

Key challenges of silo busting in these exceptional times are:

1. Change is needed, but the path is unclear.
2. Struggle to solve cross-functional problems.
3. Lack of leadership consensus.

Challenge: It is clear that change is needed, but the path forward is unclear.

Issue: Warring, competing agendas at the top; inertia at the bottom among those not yet directly affected by the changing market; and confusion among the rank-and-file about what to do day-to-day to enable strategy.

Solution: Align senior leaders to clarify the path forward and develop the governance to provide guidance along the way. Depending on the level of change required, you may have to engage both business lines and functions broadly, which requires strong and clear messaging from the C-suite. This support can mean the difference between failure and success: When teams have aligned support and ownership, you will see a much higher rate of success compared with those that have not.

Challenge: Siloed teams struggle to solve cross-functional problems.

Issue: There is a strong temptation to create teams composed of people who have a history of successfully working together; it seems efficient because they can speak in shorthand and share similar norms and ways of working. However, this approach replicates existing problems — often the ones that you are trying to eliminate — instead of encouraging individuals from different functions to truly "think future state" and collaborate.

Solution: Rather than creating separate groups of functional and business unit representatives, create cross-functional work streams and teams. Pay attention not just to the composition of the team, but also to the size. In large teams, responsibility is often diffuse, which can lead to stalling of efforts. Continue to monitor the team make up and interactions and make adjustments where needed.

Challenge: Leaders can't reach consensus.

Issue: Conflicts are inevitable, but with the establishment of new governance models, teams, and structures, the path to resolution is also uncharted territory. And although we often recommend having two leaders, their equal stature can result in a standoff.

Solution: Clarify who has the final decision-making authority. In some instances, you can deliberately create a situation where two people have the decision-making authority and must jointly make the final decision. In such cases, you need to make certain the right data is being brought to the table and is transparent to both parties, to ensure that the disagreement is not a result of one party's data that the other might dispute.

Adjusting to market disruptions is often a high-stakes proposition for organizations. Failing to break down silos and disrupt the status quo is riskier. By leveraging the 3 best practices described here, leaders can improve collaboration, communication, and trust between their teams and create a more effective path to growth and profitability during times of significant change.

And even after the most significant changes have occurred, the process of breaking down silos will have made an organization more flexible and agile for the future. Silos may remain, but they are less likely to be rigid obstacles if a company has approached transformation this way.

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As an experienced organizational development speaker, consultant, master facilitator, coach, and author - his focuses on delivering meaningful and measurable strategies for organizations to create insightful leaders and harness team potential. With over 20 years in the organizational development industry, Corey is well known for his ability to connect with any audience at any size. He has provided strategic learning, organizational consulting, professional speaking, coaching and training to organizations - of all sizes - across North America. Some of his clients include: Shell, Aviva, BMO, VIA, Tim Hortons, Miele, and government agencies at all levels. He has a results-based partnership approach to develop customized solutions that meet an organization's unique business needs and resolve their most significant issues, helping them to create a lasting competitive advantage.