*PM World **Journal*** *(ISSN: 2330-4480)*   *Leading and Communication Silos -*
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Leading and Communication Silos – Advice for Program Managers[1]

Rob Carlson

The only thing that makes sense is to strive for greater collective enlightenment.

~ Elon Musk[2]

Introduction

Our team struggled to build systems on schedule. It was unclear from the information presented at team status meetings that performance would be getting better as late deliveries began to mount. As a Portfolio Manager, I had the overall responsibility for the project's performance and was the primary point of contact for our customers. I needed to explain the reason for our late deliveries but could not determine the poor performance's root cause from the general status meetings. The program manager was frustrated with the manufacturing team and didn't understand why they were struggling. It seemed that each day brought new challenges, and there was no end to the struggles and delayed shipment of our products.

After attending a few meetings with the manufacturing team, I learned we had a communication silo problem that inhibited collaboration and limited our ability to recover. Development engineering could resolve the manufacturing issues, but they did not attend the daily meetings and had no dedicated resources to assist manufacturing. Development engineering said they were not aware of the issues and thought the manufacturing team could resolve them. The Program Manager is responsible for ensuring this type of preventable situation doesn't occur by leveraging a robust program communication plan. Shouldn't the functional teams also want to prevent this type of communication failure? Isn't our collective goal to succeed as an organization together? Can leadership bridge the silos?

Communication Silos

Communication Silos are often an artifact of how organizations are organized and managed. Like the grain silos in agriculture that segregate grain types from another, organizations are functionally aligned and managed. In organizations that employ a matrix program organization designed for flexibility, there are often two management chains with functional teams often having competing goals, priorities, and pressures that lead to an inward focus rather than outward or broader team focus. The attitude of "us against them" can lead to poor information sharing, blaming, and general dysfunction. In a 2002 study on Internal Collaboration, the

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[2] Vance, A. (2015). *Elon Musk: Tesla, SpaceX, and the Quest for a Fantastic Future*. Harper Collins.

American Management Association (AMA) found that 83% said silos exist in their organizations, with 97% of those respondents saying it harms their organizations[3]. Functional teams rarely go into a program with their guard up and prepared to protect their organization at the cost of the broader team's success. However, they may not realize how they contribute to poor or dysfunctional communication that slows their ability to deliver products to customers. Program Managers can lead their organizations to overcome silo communication by understanding how and where it exists and employing tools and strategies that change their program's culture and possibly their more extensive organization. By employing the strategies related to anticipation, engagement, and building, program managers can break-down communication silos and create numerous opportunities to be successful.

Anticipate

The program manager has a leadership responsibility to anticipate challenges to the program and the team, which is often clearly defined in a risk management plan. However, understanding the organization's culture, the functional teams' makeup, and history is not typically found in a risk management plan. To anticipate challenges with communication, a study of the organization will provide a starting point for getting ahead of silo communications. One example of an innovative technique for learning about the organization and anticipating how they will relate is to conduct a survey of the departments and ask how well other departments work with them[4]. A software company was facing competitive challenges and an inability to adapt to market conditions because silos limit performance-employed techniques. They referred to it as an "internal customer service program" and used the learning from the surveys to focus their attention and energy, discovering which departments and relationships worked well and which struggled and needed leadership help to improve[2,3].

Engage

Program Managers must establish relationships with all the critical functional leaders and program stakeholders to communicate all things related to team performance. Attending working-level meetings on occasion can also be an impactful and fruitful engagement technique. Learning how the team operates and how they get things done, and the friction points will help a program manager. A visit to a functional team meeting also allows the team to understand better how their efforts fit the customers' needs. Explaining what the customer will do with the finished product and why they need it when they help put the team's work into perspective and make their efforts a shared contribution to a greater purpose and success. Recognizing and rewarding functional team members who contribute is another way to engage and encourage collaboration.

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[3] Stone, F. (2004). Deconstructing silos and supporting collaboration. Employment Relations Today, 31(1), 11-18.
[4] Pittinsky, T. L. (2010). Softening silos: The nuts and bolts of leading amid difference. *Leader to Leader,* (57), 18-23. https://doi.org/10.1002/ltl.423

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Build

Functional alignments and silo thinking may dominate an organizational culture, but portfolios and programs can establish their subcultures. Creating integrated product teams (IPT) that share the same workspace brings disparate functional organizations together, allowing them to communicate more effectively while also learning about them as people and developing friendships. During the pandemic, the purpose of producing togetherness created by the IPT is now virtual creating some friction to developing personal relationships between team members. Leveraging technology such as video conferencing will help when communicating with individuals and groups. One on one video chats with functional leaders will help maintain that critical relationship when in-person meetings are not an option. Small and informal team meetings are another way to connect and keep relationships sustained.

DevOps

Creating or adopting an organizational system of bringing functional teams together can be an effective method of breaking down silos. DevOps is an abbreviation for Development and Operations. It refers to a process and culture that leverages agile-based principles emphasizing communication, collaboration, transparency, and learning for teams throughout development and operations. Though it is primarily applied to software development in an Agile framework, use has expanded and is starting to be used to develop and manufacture hardware and systems. A foundation of the concept is that all stakeholders involved in the delivery process share the same goals and work closely together[5]. Employing an organizational system such as DevOps will help create a process and system-level approach to bring teams together, but this is a relatively new concept in manufacturing and should not be the only method leaders use to break-down silos.

Conclusion

Ultimately, bridging or tearing down silos is a leader's responsibility and can be achieved by program leaders who employ strategies focused on anticipation, engagement, and building. Organizational system changes such as DevOps can help, but it's leaders who have the responsibility to reduce friction wherever it appears, especially an area as vital as effective communication. When functional teams communicate and change their thinking to "we" instead of "us versus them" focused, the result creates an environment where individuals, programs, and organizations can achieve their best.

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[5] Hüttermann, M. (2012). *DevOps for developers*. Apress.

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