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"Don't Tear Down Those Silos, Build Them Up!"

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Contrary to the prevailing popular wisdom coming from of many IT trainers, consultants, and industry analysts, silos are actually a very good thing.... don't waste time trying to tear silos down, instead invest in making your silos even stronger!

More and more analysts, consultants, and business people have come to the conclusion that "the problem" with IT is silos. Silos are imaginary "walls" that separate an organization into discrete sub-organizations, each with a specific agenda and separate bureaucracy.

Silo bureaucracies impede communications, reduce efficiency, and increase costs. Unique silo agendas prevent teamwork and attainment of common objectives. Thus many come to the conclusion that silos are bad and must be torn down.

I disagree. I think silos are useful and need to be strengthened, not torn down. But before we tear them down or build them up, let's slow down and talk about how silos are built.

Silos can be created by location, technology, capability, language, and many other means. The occurrence of silos within organizations is not only natural, but it is also common. Contrary to popular belief and the prevailing thoughts of many IT consultants and industry analysts, silos are actually a very good thing.

Consider the field of medicine where healthcare providers all work in silos, which is a very good thing -- I for one would be quite wary of going to a podiatrist when I need an ophthalmologist. [An ophthalmologist is a physician who specializes in the medical and surgical care of the eyes and visual system. A podiatrist is a physician that specializes in medical care of the foot, ankle, and lower leg.]

Consider too higher education, where colleges and universities organize themselves by silo, with some in specializing in finance (Bentley) , others science (MIT), etc. The military relies on silos – the Air Force handles planes, the Army handles tanks. You get the idea -- silos are everywhere, and they serve an important purpose. Silos are the only proven way to manage a hierarchy of related groups of specialists and their support systems.

Silos represent an effective way of managing and developing increasingly specific skills required of any field. Silos are not bad per se, are often required, and can in fact be very effective and useful. The "silo problem" lies not with the silo concept at all, but rather with the lack of communications between silos, and lack of control over silos.

The real problem with most IT silos is that silos often have a self-contained or specialized language, as well as self-contained processes and support systems in order to operate. Without higher level process controls that connect these silo systems into part of a larger whole, IT becomes a tower of Babel.

Following I describe how the IT Infrastructure Library® (ITIL®) aids in strengthening IT silos, which should be one of the goals of every manager within IT and the business.

From Silos to Teams

We can take a lesson from the builders of the pyramids and turn silos into teams. The ancient Egyptians used silos – markings on block indicate which team cut, transported and placed which blocks. Indeed, it now seems that there were competitions between these teams as well.

Teams work together and with leadership can create esprit de corp. Teams have smaller special teams within them as

well. Consider American football, where every team has three broad team groupings: offense, defense, and special teams. These teams all work together as a unit to get the job done and win the game. [See DITY volume 2, issue 31 for more on team building.]

Once established as a team, its natural for them to want to compete. Competition does not mean winners and losers, but rather working to be the best they can be. The first way to leverage your silos is to acknowledge them as valuable, and re-brand them as a team. And I mean a formal team. When I became a private line central office manager in New York City for the brokerage community, the first thing I did was re-brand our office as the "Private Line Professionals." We competed with ourselves to be the best we could be. We (as a team) constantly strived to meet our numbers, reduce defects, and "win".

Another important requirement to strengthen silos is to require inter-silo communications and commitments. Commitment begins with understanding. Educating silos about their place in the whole is the starting point. After understanding how each silo, for example mainframe, has to work with the other silos, for example Service Desk, get the silos to produce Operating Level Agreements (OLAs). [see DITY volume 2, issue 14 for more on creating OLAs]

OLAs codify the relationship between silos, and provide the goal for silo team members. Review the OLA and publicly report your findings. This is your competition. Your silo "wins" when they meet OLA expectations.

Managing Silos

Silos are how we manage increasing levels of technical knowledge – in all fields, not just within IT shops. It does not make sense to have a manager or team leader who does not understand the job performed by subordinates.

Like all powerful tools, silos done wrongly can (and do) result in awful working conditions, poor quality IT services, and increased costs. Eventually however, evolution ferrets out the poorly managed silos – they get outsourced, or worse, the entire enterprise fails.

The most common problem with silos is the devastating feudal system. This is where each silo manager vies for the top spot in IT, and resorts to internal bickering or outright hostility toward other silos. Nobody wins in the feudal system. Compensating managers and other team leaders on their ability to communicate, build bridges, and lead their team in support of the other teams is one way to prevent or combat IT feudalism.

Strong central process control over all silos prevents many silo problems. In fact, without strong oversight and a CSIP it is common to such silo problems.

Silos require careful local management attention and commitment as well. Silo managers must be competent in their specialty, be excellent communicators, and be the champion of their team. As mentioned previously, they must also document (via OLAs, and perhaps Service Level Agreements) the expected job of the silo, and track the teams performance against them.

Team members within silos also require cross-silo activities and relationships. We have all seen the classic cafeteria divided by job function (another silo) with developers on one side, hardware on the other, and neither group talking to the other. Team dependency training can help these, as can simple corporate outings.

Even cross-training and “sensitization” efforts yield better bridges between silos. Even simply is "cross-training" or spending time in another silo. Consider the eye-opening experience of a software developer required to actually use the software they wrote in production for a week.

Building Bridges with ITIL

From one perspective, the ITIL is very specific and even prescriptive when it describes the importance of communications between silos. Many of the process activities are there simply to enforce and institutionalize inter-silo communications. One of the strengths of the ITIL is ability to build bridges between silos. Far from tearing down silos, the ITIL describes in quite some detail how to strengthen them.

For example, consider the Forward Schedule of Changes or FSC. The FSC is a listing of changes occurring in the future. Assembled by Change Management, the purpose of the FSC is to communicate planned changes since changes are the result of most of the failures in IT. The FSC comes from Change Management to Incident Management and the Service

Desk and from there to the users and customers of IT services.

Another example is the knowledge base of known errors. This database, maintained by Problem Management, is for the benefit of Incident Management. These are but two of many examples of inter-silo and cross-silo communications and coordination.

Silos exist in every organization. Whether the silo is large, like business and IT, or small, like developers and service desk agents, or even smaller like senior techs and junior techs, silos are everywhere.

ITIL can strengthen silos, build communications and awareness between silos and teams within silos, and help solve the "IT problem." Silos are not bad by themselves, and in fact, are very useful if you can harness the power of the latent teams within them. Silos are teams, and using silos creates natural learning systems.

Harnessing the power of silos requires a plan, improved process controls, and strong leadership. The benefits of harnessing silos are:

- improved quality of IT services
- achieving business/IT alignment
- increased IT efficiency
- reductions in IT costs

So don't waste time trying to tear silos down, instead invest in making your silos stronger! The next time someone tells you that you need to tear down those silos tell them you want to build them up!