



Research Paper

Trouncing Silo Mindset in Organizational Communication Structure: A Leadership Imperative

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Abstract: Communication is very important to organizational leaders and there is a high demand for effective communication, however, communication silos still appear to be a barrier and concern. Where an organization is deficient in effectively disseminating information across its units, it can be said to suffer from communication silos. Which is considered as one of the primary sources of communication barriers. Overhauling a communication breakdown can be daunting, however by engaging some of the recommendations in the article, an organization can bust through those silos and let the innovative ideas and communication flow freely.

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I. Introduction

Communication barriers are a major concern for many organizations and research has indicated that communication silos are one of the major deterrents to the progress of an organization. It creates communication barriers both horizontally and vertically and ultimately encourages bunker mentalities (Leadership Excellence, 2018). Communication silos exist where individual units are unaware of the significant impact the processes and business decisions have on other units in the organization.

Communication does not occur in a vacuum; it is part of the culture of an organization. As such, communications absorb the character of the organization's culture. It is essential that those who actively create leadership messages be cognizant of those who passively receive those messages (Baldoni, 2003).

Essentially the leadership of an organization must find ways to encourage open communication across the various units and inspire cooperation. Propagating this may be quite difficult depending on how long such turf battles have been going on and how entrenched employees are in this behavior. (Leadership Excellence, 2018)

What is the Problem?

Often, there are tell-tale signs that an organization is having a communication breakdown leading to a great deal of dissatisfaction and ineffectiveness. In a scenario where during a management review exercise, the leadership of the organization discovered that the amount of communication between the managerial cadre is seriously dwindling leading to gross inefficiency and ineffectiveness in the system. It also realized that the inability to disseminate relevant information through proper channels to relevant stakeholders, as well as the lack of knowledge of processes and procedure of the different business units, accounts for the communication problems within the organization. It was even more shocking to find out that there are projects going on in other parts of the organization that other units were 'out of the loop' on. It is at such a point that it realized communication silos have already become an issue.

At some point, employees will require input and support from other units within the organization or the other units will approach a unit requesting information or resources at different times. However, collaborating with other business units is not always easy as they may encounter conflicting processes and priorities. Such reluctance to collaborate is an indication of poor communication and a lack of awareness of its importance to the overall objective of the organization resulting in a frustrating experience between business units. Similarly, a desire to exert control over one's area or an unwillingness to put in the effort to communicate with other groups is the root cause of these silo issues (The thoughtLEADERS blog, 2018).

Ironically, communication silos are the bane of most companies, especially as most organizations operate in a matrixed environment, particularly the bigger companies. It's been discovered that while communication increases in its frequency in matrix forms of organizations, the quality of communications decreases. In the same vein, cooperation between employees was also found to decrease in the matrix. In such organizations, employees behave in a manner that benefits their sub-unit, but such attitudes are detrimental to the organization. In fact, leaders who operate with "command-and-control" skills that they imbibed in traditional hierarchical organizations have a difficult time building networks for cooperation in the matrix structure (Sy, T & Cote, S, 2004). The side effect of which results in unhealthy competition, office politics, or an overall lack of transparency and communication across the company (Jason Albanese, 2018).

Defeating the Silo Mindset

The corporate world today requires teams to collaborate and innovate. Consequently, an organization culture must overcome silos and create effective, cross-functional relations between business units. In defeating the silo mindset, an organization has a better chance to make significant progress (Cornett, 2018).

The key to defeating mental silos between employees in an organization is challenging employees to recognize the bigger picture of the organization's goals and take a broader view of their own work as it relates to other units in the business. To buttress this position, Ian Cornett (2018) submitted as follows;

“A unified vision that is broadly communicated among employees helps individuals to understand that individual and team goals are secondary to organizational vision. For organizations that have grown accustomed to operating in silos, the vision will need to be communicated often and across different mediums so that it remains top of mind. When people see the bigger picture, they can begin to understand their unique place in the organization, as well as that of others”.

Except there is an established standard of communication channels, employees will continually plummet into the silo mentality and remain oblivious to the impact of their work on the rest of the organization. Following this perspective, Baldoni (2003) suggests the communication channel must not be too restrictive or confined to certain regular channels, rather leaders must engage in flexible and creative approaches to talking with their people at different levels, in different functions. He suggested that;

“For example, if you are looking for suggestions, create an email box. If you are looking for creativity, stage a pizza party. Invite people to come; the price of admission is a suggestion or a new idea. On the other hand, if there is a breakdown in communications, look for ways to get individuals or teams together. Maybe the best way is a meeting, or maybe it is a coffee outside of the office. Be willing to experiment. There is no single way to facilitate good communication; the only limit is the power of the leader's imagination. And if that is lacking, ask people to find ways to encourage communication among themselves. This is often the best way to get people to work together”.

Also, communication is a continuous action step which helps fosters collaborative relationships. Therefore, it is important for employees to understand that their relationships with other business units don't just affect their own work, or that of their team. Such relationships impact the whole organization on the long run. Units can collaborate effectively when they understand one another's roles and the different business functions in achieving the organization's goals, and they value one another's input, make for a more efficient workplace. Hence, such relationships build a highly functional and profitable organization.

In considering the approach to defeating the silo mindset, Jason Albanese (2018) opined a strategy to defeat the silo mentality is to set up an ambassador program in organizational settings, using the premise of diplomatic relations between nations of the world where ambassadors or diplomats are sent to live in other countries as representatives. Here, each unit is required to send a representative to go and sit with another department across the organization for a few days or even a week. This employee then gathers key insights into the operations of that unit while sharing insight about what their own team is working on. He submitted that such cross-pollination could yield innovative solutions or products and improve working relationships across the organization.

Hackman and Johnson (2017) stated that; “the goal of communication is to create shared reality between message sources and receivers” (p.6). Leaders in an organization must be seen to epitomize the “shared reality” of defeating communication silos in the organization. Therefore, employees in different teams will not likely to collaborate and will remain in silos unless they see the leaders modeling collaborative behavior. Company leaders must set the example by demonstrating that they expect cross-functional teamwork and information between their employees. Cornett (2018) recommended the following ways in which leaders can support greater collaboration:

- i. Talk about shared goals between teams
- ii. Assign a team member or two to keep another team in the loop on a key project
- iii. Regularly communicate and spend time with leaders of other teams
- iv. Recognize and reward individuals who demonstrate collaboration with other teams

To further shift and defeat the silo mindsets in an organization, training and retraining employees would make a world of difference. Employees must be trained to engage in behaviors that support more teamwork and collaboration. The company must organize team-building exercises, conflict management training, or communication skills courses that can help employees learn more about the dangerous effects of silos, while helping them to see the positive benefits of collaboration between teams and provide useful techniques for breaking down silos that negatively impact the whole organization (Cornett, 2018).

II. Conclusion

Company leaders often deal with several critical issues and championing change of status quo is never easy and is rarely wanted. However, for an organization to stay innovative and or operationally effective, change is an inevitable reality that must be embraced first by the leadership of the organization and then everyone in the organization.

Therefore, an integrated communication process and or channel is necessary for companies and organizations to adopt and encourage across the entire organization. However, for internal communication to serve a strategic role and ensure that employees are not overlooked, internal communicators need to be treated as equals among their peers in the different business units and at all levels in the organization.

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