

...And the Silo Walls Come TUMBLING DOWN



By Jim Sirbasku

Every leader faces management challenges, but one of the toughest problems that put managers at risk is an inability to see beyond the four walls of the department or the unit. Call it the manager's "functional silo."

That last word conjures up images of barriers that reach skyward, and sometimes the walls that managers erect around themselves and their teams do seem almost insurmountable. One top leader says she feels like

she has to climb the world's tallest ladder to get inside one manager's unit. Getting through is no easy task, but discovering the prize inside – an able and skilled manager who needs clarity about his job – can make the climb worthwhile.

Haven't we all watched a strong manager who believes that his duty to his department is more important than his obligation to the organization? Such devotion to the team is admirable, but when carried to extremes, it's likely to keep the manager stuck in his silo while others who can see

the big picture climb over him to get to the top.

Silo-building managers risk their organization's well-being as well as their own. You can recognize the signs in your own organization if you have managers who:

- Refuse to deal with co-workers outside their immediate unit.
- Habitually make decisions beneficial to their team but not beneficial to the organization.
- Balk at making changes that affect them, even if the change helps the organization.
- Keep beneficial information inside the "team tent."
- Appear not to grasp the organization's mission/vision.

One organization deals with the problem of silo managers by never letting the manager build the silo in the first place. How? One way is by holding regular meetings where

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departmental leaders share information, discuss problems and plans, and generally see the organization from different perspectives.

Or, annually appoint a different manager to a committee made up of leaders outside the organization. Have this panel of appointees serve as the fundraising arm for a community non-profit agency. All these participating companies will raise their profiles in the community while performing good works. Each manager on the panel learns more about his organization and the role it plays in the community.

This accomplishes several in-house goals as well:

First, it avoids continually drawing

water from the same well. Every CEO can point to departments that turn in exceptional performance year after year. The temptation of working with thoroughbreds, however, is that we go back to them – and only them – race after race. At the very least, this practice risks tiring high performers to the point of indifference.

Second, passing around the committee membership gives new performers a chance to develop and show off new skills. The thoroughbreds set the benchmark. Others can then strive to meet it, or even reach beyond.

Third, regularly working with people outside of a unit brings down the silo walls more quickly than any

well-chosen words of a CEO. Why? People often learn best while doing. Envision reaching over a wall to grab a hand. Doing so is almost impossible when the walls are silo-high. For effective collaboration, committee members must emerge from their silos and meet in a brand new environment.

Leaders can also use a cross-functional in-house team. One example is a team that examines the impact of implementing a change in customer service or some other crucial operation. Such a committee could be composed of managers from each of an organization's departments.

Other remedies to bring down the silo walls include:

Explaining how each spoke is important to the wheel. In other words, establish in clear language how the manager's team fits into the organizational big picture. This is especially important for a new manager who may just be learning how to run his department. Direct supervisors should demonstrate early on that the wheel is

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only as strong as its individual spokes, and that one spoke alone isn't strong enough to support the wheel.

Establishing a cross-functional goal for the manager. In this scenario, the manager reports to someone else who can monitor progress, facilitate discussion, offer advice, and drive accountability. Ideally, this is someone who's been in charge of a department and now holds more than departmental responsibility.

Three-point monitoring to hold the manager accountable. The three points of access are the manager's manager or boss, his peers, and his subordinates. Why three points instead of just one? Because it's next

to impossible to monitor a person's performance all by yourself. You'd have to be at the same place as this manager all the time, from the time he reports to work to the time he leaves the parking lot at the end of his workday. Most supervisors have more than one person and one task to attend to each day, so this helps establish a way for the manager to be accountable to his peers and subordinates too. Make it known that you'll be asking each point of access to evaluate his performance. Do this for everyone and it becomes less threatening – and everyone is accountable to everyone!

If you're tired of looking at the silo walls from the outside, imagine how limited the view from within must be. It's time to bring those walls down, permanently. **N**

Jim Sirbasku is the CEO of Profiles International. For more information, please contact johncaspole@AssessmentSpecialists.com.