

The Silos of Non-Integration

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An article regarding some recent employee satisfaction survey results (pre-pandemic) pointed to five key areas of associate concerns when it comes to their work experience. These five areas include company culture, organizational confusion, non-integrated silos of information or work, ineffective communications, and a lack of innovation. In Mesa's series of knowledge articles, we will be touching on all these potential organizational shortcomings from an organizational management perspective. The first up: non-integrated silos (of effort, of information, of competency, etc.).

As a child of the 70's and 80's, I love to reference events from those formative times to help make a point. We're returning to the late 80's in this article to reference the 1988 U.S. Men's Olympic 400M Relay team. I've never ran a relay race in my life, but I've watched quite a few. And this race was supposed to be one for the record books with the USA almost "guaranteed" a gold medal. In fact, it had been since 1912 that the USA hadn't made the 400M finals (not counting the 1980 Olympics that were boycotted by the USA) and the USA had only lost in the finals at one Olympics (1960) since 1912 due to, strangely enough, a baton exchange issue.



Each member of that relay team were champions in their own right, many of whom were medalists from other events, previous Olympics, and past World Championships. A team comprised of individual champions couldn't fail, correct? Incorrect.

Now envision the lifecycle of a project like a relay race. There are individual contributors that are empowered with advancing the project (like a baton) that next step or series of steps in its ultimate progression. Those steps are usually clearly defined with lanes, beginning points, and ending points, again much like a relay race. Winning the race is the successful completion of a project. Gold medal!

Not so fast. Much like companies and organizations that build strong individual departments and teams, projects can often run like the 1988 Olympic 400M relay race, USA version. Imagine, if you will, a department or company function that performs their part of the project well only to get to their stopping point and suffer from an ineffective handoff to the next leg of the "relay". Was the proverbial baton dropped, or as is the case in many instances, tossed to the next participant? Whose fault is the mis-coordinated handoff or toss? The short answer is that the entire team is to blame.

So, we have identified an eerily common problem (and practice) in the industry. The solution, not an easy one, lies in knocking down the real and perceived silos that inhibit and prevent integration. Why are the early chapters of PMI's Project Management Body



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Knowledge Article

of Knowledge (PMBOK) dedicated to project phases and their integration? It's because it is so important to effectively integrate project activities, information, and teams.

It sounds so simple that it's almost unfair to keep repeating that phrase because silos come in many forms and most of them are well constructed and long-standing. These silos were likely created in a time when separate groups of functionalities had both the need and desire to effectively communicate and they also understood team member roles. I know you're asking, "So, what's different today?" We will address communication improvements in an upcoming article because communication improvements, while important and another employee satisfaction area of concern, will not alone break down the silos.



Outside of communication, a serious contributing factor tends to be Organizational Confusion (another employee pain point and future knowledge article) and the importance of effective leadership and defining roles and responsibilities. Confusion created by a lack of effective leadership and a lack of understanding of one's roles and responsibilities are certainly huge contributors to siloed organizations. So too is the failure to plan for and define integration points within your team, organization, or project.

Clearly defining the "baton" that is actually being passed from "leg to leg" of the race (or phase to phase of a project lifecycle) cannot be overstated in importance. That "baton", better known as a deliverable, can change from phase to phase of a project. Different stakeholders (maybe silos themselves) can have different requirements, understandings, and expectations of what they are about to receive or what is going to be expected of or from them. Knowing everyone's requirements and expectations at the project charter stage (during initiation) becomes the driver to a project execution plan which defines precise work activities, resources, responsibilities, schedules, and resultant outputs. These clearly defined and bi-directional expectations remove the need for protective silo "walls" and lead to integrated, team-based operations.

As you can see, a lot of organizational improvement and increases in organizational maturity go into breaking down organizational silos. Whether those improvements come about in the way of better communications, a deeper and richer organizational culture, or simply better refinement of requirements and team integration, they will be highly valued. Working to define or refine company processes, procedures, accountabilities, roles & responsibilities, and performance expectations will all drive needed improvements. Of course, we are talking about Organizational Project Management (OPM).

Additionally, these improvements can be project, team, or organizationally related, and you can count on the fact that these silos have likely been there for a while and they won't disappear quickly. However, proper organizational project management along with persistence and dedication to improvement will go a long way to creating your effective "relay team" worthy of that proverbial gold medal. Ultimately, the payback, both financially and organizationally, will offset any costs or organizational stress that may develop during the process. Let our experts assist with your OPM process and ultimate improvement.