

## Management Insights

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### Poking Holes in Silos

***Tearing down bureaucracies altogether might be overly ambitious, but poking a few holes may get at the very resources agencies need to succeed.***

**By Babak Armajani**

If you are someone who worries about "silos" in your organization -- thinking and behavior that is so parochial as to hurt your organization's overall performance -- take this little test.

- Are unit or department heads in your organization held accountable to their boss for the performance and functioning of their unit?
- Does the budget process allocate money to departments and units?
- Do fixed assets like computers and desks "belong" to a specific unit or department?
- Are units and departments assigned a particular space over which they have jurisdiction?
- Are personnel in your organization identified as being part of or "working for" a particular unit or department?

If you answered affirmatively on two or more of these questions, then you are experiencing silo-type behavior because, notwithstanding any leadership rhetoric to the contrary, your organization actively builds and reinforces silos.

Henry Ford, perhaps more than any other person, is responsible for introducing the bureaucratic system to modern organizations. He reasoned that if everyone is given a clearly defined job to do (turf) and the boss deftly engineers and coordinates those jobs then the organization will be productive. These are the roots of what we bemoan today as silos. The practices implicit in my "test" questions are among those imbedded in management systems that work to define, build and to reinforce such structures.

To change silo behavior, one must go back to the management systems responsible for inducing that behavior. Below I have some concrete suggestions for changing those management practices, but first, let's reexamine the silo metaphor and recall why they exist in the first place.

Consider two different kinds of silos. First, we have a grain silo. This kind of silo contains what we need to nurture life. We want what is inside this silo.

The second silo is the inside of an abandoned Titan missile silo. This silo performs a protective function, insulating the inner environment from outside forces.

Organizational silos also serve these functions -- providing an insulated container within which a unit can efficiently produce the thing an organization needs -- and they serve these functions so well that they keep us trapped or prevent us from getting at the very resources we need.

Given the functions they have served historically, tearing silos down altogether might be overly ambitious. But we can at least poke some holes in our silos, holes big enough to be a portal in and out. Consider these changes:

**Hold the appropriate people *jointly* accountable for certain results.** A city manager that I greatly respect holds department heads accountable for both the performance of their own department and for certain citywide results (like crime, economic vitality or bighted housing). This forces them to work together on these issues.

**Budget to outcomes instead of to departments.** A number of cities, counties and states use outcome budgeting systems where money is first allocated to certain outcomes and not to departments. To get a share of the money, a department has to demonstrate how it will contribute to improved performance on those outcomes.

**Use space to build collaboration rather than as a proprietary asset.** What is so magical about having everyone in the same unit sit next to each other? "Because they work with each other," you say? Okay. What would happen if organizational geography was based on people who work with each other *regardless* of the units to which they report? What would happen if workstations were mobile?

**Create a flexible, adaptable personnel system that supports the changes in work assignments demanded by today's circumstances.** What if everyone had a kind of "homeroom" organizational base for administrative purposes, but their time could be allocated on a project basis to the tasks that demand their skills and attention most? In certain functional areas such as IT, many organizations assign their personnel primarily to projects rather than units.

**Rotate high-level managers.** As one moves up the chain of command, one's job becomes less technical and more managerial. Although one technical skill set may be very distinct from another, managing is managing. Based on this notion, the military rotates executives every two or three years. The head of a large human services agency will often do the same thing in order to promote better understanding of the big picture and greater permeability in silo walls.

The silo may have performed a vital function one century ago, but it's an antiquated concept. Jobs are no longer as simple, nor organizations as static as in the days of Henry Ford. Just as grain and missile silos are used less and less, so too must we move away from these old organizational structures and create more fluid ways of getting work done.