Maneuvering Through Politics and Silos
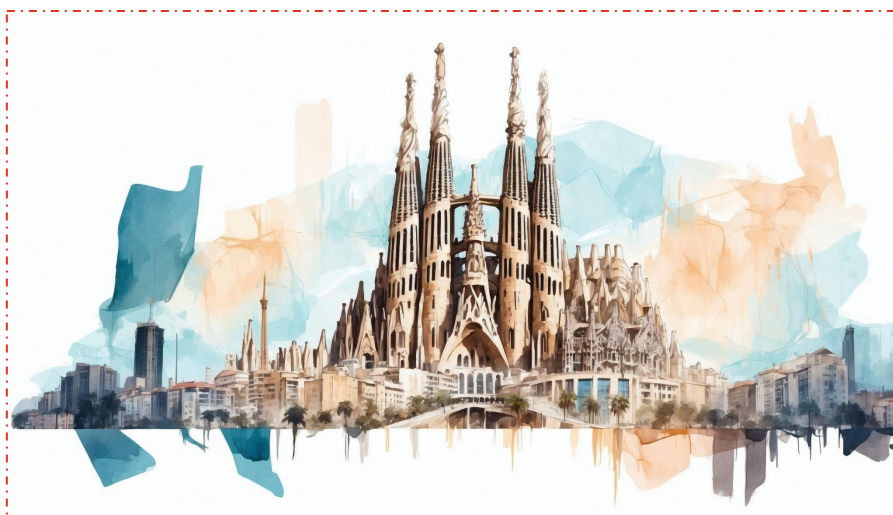
by Lauren Feehrer, CCXP

By building bridges, not walls, we champion change initiatives to spark cross-functional collaboration.

Setting the Stage at the Sagrada Familia

The Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, Spain, still under construction after more than 150 years, symbolizes the complexities of uniting diverse teams under a bold vision. Its towers, standing independently, serve as a metaphor for organizational silos and demonstrate how – with time and effort – they can fit together to form something new and beautiful.

Do you see your organization in the Sagrada Familia? Perhaps you're trying to bring together the leaders of your 18 towers. If so, do you know where to begin?

Meet The Author

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She's worked with clients like Dell, Best Buy, IDEXX Laboratories, and Merck, her work has been recognized with the North American Customer Centricity Award for Best Customer Experience Strategy.

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How Silos Impede Transformation Programs

Cross-functional collaboration is essential for success. According to Project Manager's 2022 study "Global Trends in Project Management," 26% of leaders identified poor cross-team collaboration as the biggest challenge in project management. The consequences? A lack of a cohesive strategy, misaligned goals, duplicated efforts, slower decision-making, and missed opportunities for innovation. In large-scale initiatives, the complexity and scope only amplify these challenges.

Using Influence to Break Through

To foster effective cross-functional collaboration, leaders should focus on influence over authority. Leading with influence involves inspiring and motivating teams to work toward common goals while creating an environment where collaboration is valued and actively pursued.

We recommend four key strategies to achieve this:

1. **Connect the dots** to help team members see how their work aligns with the organization's broader objectives.
2. **Co-design a shared vision** with input from all relevant stakeholders.
3. **Build understanding and empathy** across teams by encouraging open dialogue and offering opportunities for team members to learn from one another's perspectives.
4. **Incentivize collaboration** to reinforce desired behaviors and demonstrate the value placed on teamwork.

Connecting the Dots

Connecting the dots is crucial for helping team members understand how their roles and tasks fit into the broader organizational goals. Two effective ways to facilitate this are through interactive storyboards and simulation games. These tools vividly illustrate how departments and projects are interconnected, allowing team members to explore the organization's workflow, understand dependencies, and see the impact of their work on others.

Co-Design a Shared Vision

A powerful tool for fostering collaboration is the concept of a shared vision, which aligns everyone toward a common future and clarifies organizational goals. Co-designing a shared vision starts with integrating individual perspectives and aspirations within small teams.

As these team visions take shape, leaders can use structured workshops and open dialogue to align larger groups and departments, ultimately creating a unified organizational vision.

This collaborative approach ensures that the shared vision reflects the collective goals and aspirations of the organization, fostering unity and commitment among team members as they work towards achieving strategic objectives.

Another technique is the Remembering the Future[1] activity from the Innovation Games workshop series by Luke Hohmann. During this activity, team members brainstorm success factors — such as increased customer satisfaction or improved efficiency — across short-term (next quarter), mid-term (next year), and long-term (five years) timeframes. This process promotes transparency and accountability by sharing results and accomplishments and also offers valuable learning opportunities on how these outcomes were achieved.

Build Understanding and Empathy

Understanding and empathy are indispensable when navigating organizational dynamics marked by personal agendas, competition for resources, power struggles, misaligned objectives, and influence peddling. These challenges often emerge during times of change, as different departments or leaders prioritize their goals over the organization's collective success. Recognizing the motivations behind these behaviors is key to fostering collaboration and breaking down silos.

An effective tool for facilitating this approach is the Corporate Empathy Map[2]. This tool helps visualize and consider the thoughts, feelings, needs, and experiences of colleagues across different departments. By empathizing with their perspectives, leaders gain a deeper understanding of their goals, challenges, and motivations. This foundational step promotes a culture of empathy and cooperation, allowing all voices to be heard and respected.

Corporate Empathy Map

Understanding the perspective of your colleague

THINKS & FEELS:
ANNOYED
SURPRISED
CURIOUS
ATTACKED

HEARS:
"NEW INITIATIVE"
"INVESTMENT NEEDED"

Leader's Name:
_____

SEES:
ANNUAL GOALS
100 REQUESTS/DAY

PAINS:
OVERBUDGET
POLITICS & SILOS

GAINS:
CAREER OPPORTUNITY
QUARTERLY BONUS

Concept creation by Lauren Feehrer

When faced with competing agendas or power struggles, actively listening and seeking to understand the concerns and priorities of others allows you to see things from all perspectives. For example, during a change management initiative like implementing a new ERP system, departments may have differing views on efficiency gains versus budget constraints. Acknowledging and addressing these concerns demonstrates empathy and allows you to work collaboratively to find solutions that benefit the entire organization. This approach breaks down silos and fosters a more inclusive and supportive organizational culture where diverse perspectives contribute to strategic success.

Incentivize Collaboration

Incentivizing collaboration involves creating opportunities for departments to align with common goals through mutual incentives and benefits. William Ury's concept of Building a Golden Bridge[2] highlights the importance of creating incentives that promote cooperation, especially during challenging initiatives like operational improvements or financial stability planning. For example, operations might propose phased implementation with minimal disruption or offer additional training for finance staff. These initiatives serve as 'golden bridges,' addressing concerns and incentivizing both departments to collaborate effectively on strategic initiatives. This approach helps mitigate conflicts from competing priorities and strengthens organizational unity, fostering a culture of teamwork and cooperation across departments.

From Silos to Synergy

The Sagrada Familia stands unfinished, a testament to the power of ambition and the challenges of collaboration. Just as its separate towers symbolize departmental silos, your organization may face fragmented efforts and misaligned priorities. However, unlike the Sagrada Familia, your story doesn't have to be one of perpetual construction.

Having read this far, you're now equipped with the tools to break down those walls. Ready to take action? Start by initiating a Corporate Empathy Map[3] exercise to understand another department's perspective. Pilot a warm-up workshop with the Chocolate Pizza Game. And use the 'Remember the Future' activity to co-create a shared company vision.

Remember, collaboration isn't a destination — it's a journey. By embracing these tools and fostering open communication, you can transform departmental silos into stepping stones toward a more unified and successful organization. The future of collaboration awaits. What steps will you take today?

Sources/Interactive Tools

1. **Remember the Future Template**
2. **Building A Golden Bridge**
3. **Chocolate Pizza Supply Chain Simulation Game**

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