Breaking Down Silo Walls: Successful Collaboration Across Library Departments

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Abstract

Library work has historically been organized into silos - public services, technical services, and administration. Shifting trends, technology, and staff changes, however, are necessitating that organizations adapt to the current needs of their users. Given these new requirements, the traditional library silos create unnecessary barriers to collaboration across departments. Silos must be broken down if libraries are to operate successfully in today's information environment. This article discusses how to identify problems and resistance, the benefits to breaking down silos, and offers recommended methods for collaboration that help remove the silo mindset to create a holistic library mindset.

Introduction

Library work has historically been organized into different silos: public services, technical services, and administration. These functional areas have long served to fulfill the basic needs of a library's mission and work. In many cases, however, this isolation between departments causes rigid and defensive silo walls to develop. Silos are workplace constructs and mindsets that isolate departments from one another through bureaucracy or rigid hierarchies. They are characterized by a lack of communication, information sharing, and collaboration that inhibit efficiency and productivity, reduce morale, and constrict positive workplace culture. The silo mentality splits the library into distinct groups that compete against one another instead of working towards common goals as an holistic organization.

Current trends in technology, budgets, and staffing have drastically altered the library ecosystem. In our current landscape of smaller budgets and fewer staff, the existence of rigid silos harms the library as a whole. In order to be successful, we must evolve into transparent, flexible, and cooperative organizations. Silos act as barriers to progress. Only in breaking down these walls can we best fulfill our purpose for our users. Intentionally integrated

organizations are more favorable to their employees and are more successful in meeting their users' needs. This piece will discuss why libraries should break down silos in their organizations, the kinds of resistance and problems that arise, and will showcase methods for collaboration across departments. This article will also help leaders find ways to remove the silo mindset and create a "whole library" mindset in their organization.

Problems and Resistance

Change is not always easy nor welcomed by staff. Managers and administrators are often met with resistance when instituting new workflows and attitudes. Further, changes targeted to breaking down silos represents a transformation in the traditional roles held by many library departments and staff. There is a legacy of demarcation between librarians and support staff, technical services and public services, and within library units themselves. Instituting new methods represents a complete adjustment to how staff understand and complete their work. The library world is rapidly changing, and some organizations may be so mired in traditional roles that breaking down silos, a necessary challenge, can seem like an impossible proposition.

Silos often arise because an employee or department considers a task "not my job." In her article, "This Changes Everything: Transforming the Academic Library," Sarah C. Michalak states, "In a library characterized by rigid organizational structures, each staff member in a unit learns only one job, works mostly with other unit employees and reports to one supervisor who is charged with keeping everyone fulfilling their assigned duties." Silos are reinforced by hierarchies that are extremely rigid and internal looking. Managers are evaluated by their department's work within their individual silo. Those in the department only focus on the skills they need to complete their assigned work. Everyone keeps their eyes on their own efforts and do not look out at the broader library environment. These attitudes close off avenues for collaboration and communication between staff and departments.

Silos are further reinforced by the perception of status. Roles within libraries have traditionally fallen along degreed and non-degreed lines.² Degreed librarians may work the reference desk and in collection development whereas non-degreed staff are relegated to circulation or shelving even if they have the same skills and experiences as their degreed colleagues. Many staff have worked within this tiered system for a majority of their careers. They are accustomed to focusing on their traditional role within the library while not being empowered to consider the broader context and goals of the organization. Non-degreed

support staff are often left out of meetings and conversations with professional librarians. Their opinions are not solicited nor, in some organizations, welcomed. In these organizations, professional librarians may hold biases about traditional library roles and not see support staff as a valuable resource. This divisive structure keeps degreed and non-degreed staff from sharing information and ideas. The challenges faced by the modern library necessitates a less rigid demarcation to ensure the best solutions are encouraged.

Structural obstacles can be compounded by obstacles presented by the staff themselves. Leaders and entrenched employees can be become defensive of their silo and its role within the organization. These are skilled team members who thoroughly know their jobs and may not see a reason to change. This can lead to stonewalling or refusing to cooperate when change occurs. This level of defensiveness often arises from the fear of change. Usual processes are being disturbed, and this can induce stress in employees who have long-standing routines. In defensive situations, sometimes employees will hold firm and refuse to hear any new ideas. They may hope that the "loudest voice" in the room wins. By loudly staking out their territory and making their case, they hope to keep change at bay. Common arguments can be that the alterations are unnecessary, too much/too fast, or damaging to their work. Leaders should be aware of these defensive employees so they can ensure that their opinions are not seen as more valuable than others and do not overwhelm other voices.

Not all staff will oppose change, but most will greet it with some level of fear, confusion, or trepidation. These staff members are not against change per se, but are wary of how much it will impact their roles. Change can be stress inducing, but the initial knowledge that "change is coming" is usually the hardest hurdle to overcome. After the initial acclimation to new processes and mindsets, most will be excited by how they can take advantage of the new opportunities removing silos affords. Their excitement and openness can be encouraged to help bring others on board and to create moments of collaboration.

One of the biggest roadblocks to breaking down silos is not staff resistance but a lack of information sharing. It is difficult to work across departments if you do not know who your colleagues are, what they do, or where their interests lie. While this barrier can exist because some do not like or wish to share information, it more likely results from a lack of communication infrastructure. If communications have been sparse, this lack of knowledge can leave staff wondering who is responsible for what, who approves projects, and who they should turn to with their ideas and questions. Information should always flow freely, but in

many organizations people can be omitted from the lines of communication. Along these same lines, roadblocks to breaking down silos can come from logistics. Staff members have different working styles, cultural mindsets, schedules, and attitudes. In multifaceted workplaces, all the "moving parts" can slow down change because the pieces have not worked together previously. It is likely that procedures and policies will need to be adapted to help fit the needs of the new attitudes you are trying to create.

These roadblocks are not impossible to overcome. The first step to breaking down silo walls is to make a list of what roadblocks you may experience. Frontline staff have the best idea of what problems they encounter in their work. Administrators and managers should meet with staff and departments to ask what challenges they see and what changes are on their wish list. These meetings will also give those in leadership a chance to see how their staff react to the idea of change and what ideas they have about how to institute new procedures and mindsets.

Why Break Down Silos

When library users encounter a barrier in their work, they become frustrated and either quit or turn to a perceived easier method (e.g., Google). This kind of frustration also develops when library staff encounter or are forced into silos. When the walls are hard to break through, staff are forced to develop unnecessary workarounds to solve problems. They may also undertake inefficient methods that slow down projects, undermines other units, or duplicates existing workflows. Silos generate internal-looking mindsets and can lead to feelings of isolation within an organization. This mindset individualizes library departments instead of bringing them together to work as one team.

Silos inhibit a library from achieving its core goals. In the book *Building Bridges:*Collaboration Within and Beyond the Academic Library, the authors share a story about the outcome of a library's strategic planning committee meeting. They found that "in this increasingly complex environment, actions, work, and decisions that were being made in one department had a major impact on other departments, in ways they never had before. More people needed to be consulted before policy decisions were made; workflow decisions had to involve all departments and staff who did the work needed to be included in the discussion."

For example, how a book is cataloged can have an impact on how it appears in the OPAC. That, in turn, can affect how reference staff and users search the library's system. A decision or change in one area of the library necessarily cascades to others. No single department

works in a vacuum. Silos create artificial barriers that inhibit the flow of information and ideas between the team members working to achieve these goals. When communication between departments is lacking or meets resistance, workflows and project plans are complicated and interrupted. Context is important. How is one department to know how they should complete a task if another department changes the result? Library departments have shared goals, but they can be difficult to accomplish if the bigger picture is not kept in mind.

Silos also should be opened up to allow for more efficiency and creativity. Silos are isolating because they create territories and lead to an "us vs. them" work environment versus making employees feel like a part of the whole library team. When resources are limited, as is becoming the norm in most organizations, silos lead to employees becoming defensive about their work and needs. Silos create a feeling that the library is a zero-sum game and, when one department receives funding and attention, another loses. Most libraries need to do more with less these days, and employees need to be working together instead of trying to protect their department's niche at all costs.

Rigid library structures can also be incredibly limiting to an employee's personal and professional skill development. When workers are forced into strict roles, they are not given room to expand their skill set or develop ingenuitive processes that might benefit the library. Additionally, the skills and passions your library needs may not be found in traditional roles. Michael Perini discusses how rigid staff silos can be detrimental to library success by overlooking the talents and input of support staff. He says, "When non-librarian staff are not considered for partnerships on projects with librarians, they unfortunately remain an untapped resource." Perini also argues that the lines between professional librarians and support staff are blurring in the current information ecosystem. Libraries should be using every skill at their disposal, whether or not that skill comes from a degreed librarian. There may be a support staff member on your team with coding skills the library needs, but silos and biases toward degreed librarians may cause them to be overlooked. Libraries will suffer when they let talent wither simply because it was sitting in the wrong silo or traditional library position. Our information world is changing and libraries will benefit by taking ideas from different staff backgrounds and experiences.

Additionally, in the era of smaller budgets and fewer staff, breaking down silos can free up resources to be shared across silo lines. In their brief, "21st-Century Collections:

Calibration of Investment and Collaborative Action," the Association of Research Libraries

nicely sums up that "collective problems require collective action, which requires a shared vision." Staff skills can be used wherever they are needed. Departments will feel less of a need to compete for funds or staff when they know their colleagues will help when necessary. Trust and morale will grow because staff know they can rely on one another when there are large projects or challenges to be handled. Streamlined workflows increase efficiency allowing departments to branch out into new areas and institute innovative ideas and programs. It is impossible to grow as an organization when you are forced to focus on simply keeping the lights on. Silos keep staff looking inward, and breaking them down allows departments to look outward toward providing successful user services.

It is necessary to breakdown the silos that exist in your organization. Employees and projects will function better when there are smoother, more efficient workflows and open lines of communications. Staff will begin to work as an holistic-looking team when barriers to their collaboration are removed. Staff will also grow a sense of ownership and pride in their tasks when they see the end result of all their hard work. Work can still be handed-off between departments, but removing silos will help keep the whole, broader image of the library, its mission, and its users in mind.

Methods and Recommendations

Once the decision to break down silo walls has been made, there are many ways to start collaborating. This article suggests three methods which can help reduce and remove silos in your organization. These methods are incorporating systems thinking, creating communities of practice, and mentorships and cross-training. Whether used on their own or, hopefully, in conjunction one another, instituting these changes will reduce silos and the siloed mentality in your organization.

Systems Thinking

Systems thinking involves seeing your organization as an holistic organization where departments support and collaborate with one another effectively and efficiently. The simplest approach to developing systems thinking in your library is to first ask questions and then listen. Ask your staff who they want to work with on projects, where they see the need to collaborate, and what workflows and communications patterns they wish to change, adopt, or remove. Open the lines of communication to and between your staff. Let them have conversations between each other and with the administration. Staff who are "in the weeds"

are likely to have many ideas about changes that could and should be made. For example, you can have your staff walk you through their daily activities or explain a step-by-step process such as the workflow for how returned books are reshelved. Ask what they want and need. Then listen. There is no point in fostering communication and encouraging people to talk if you are not going to actively listen to and engage with what they have to say.

After you begin asking questions and listening to your staff, it is important to open communication and sharing between departments with the goal of increasing productivity while removing duplicated procedures and tasks. The first step in this process is to review existing policies, procedures, workflows, and projects. Everyone who works in the areas under discussion, no matter how tangentially, should have a seat at the table. Each staff member should explain their role, methods, and contributions. After this review, staff can eliminate redundancies, solve problems, and streamline workflows through open and continual discussion. Each department is a part of the larger organization. To operate successfully, units and staff need to see how their role fits into the broader library system.

Creating shared procedures is the first step to creating a smoothly operating library system. In her book, Working Together: Collaborative Information Practices for Organizational Learning, Mary M. Somerville discusses the need for implementing systems thinking. Somerville summarizes, "Systems thinking encourages viewing the organization as an enterprise level organism... It recognizes that holistic systems thinking must be ongoing in organizations if participants are to function, aligned, as effect parts of the whole."8 The power of this system is that it encourages collaboration and a unified group dynamic. Somerville states, "Furthering organizational learning and advancing stakeholder relationships holds promise for avoiding an 'inward looking' library centric orientation while encouraging sustained 'outward looking' and outcomes oriented learning and improved anticipation of users' changing needs."9 Every part of the library system should be working toward the same goal and successful outcome. For example, there is no sense in a preservation department removing damaged items from the shelves for repair if the library is about to undertake a large-scale weeding project. Every staff member needs to be informed of projects and changes. This avoids creating unnecessary work and keeps an organization operating as one, whole system. Organizations can only fulfill their mission if their parts are functioning smoothly with clear, open communication and a shared vision for success. Developing projects and workflows that function efficiently from inception to delivery will benefit both staff and users.

In addition to creating shared procedures and workflows, organizations should hold regular all-staff meetings to make sure every department is working together as a team and sharing information clearly. These meetings should be brief, but long enough to discuss library's projects, goals, and success stories. When leaders share information with all staff, it increases awareness of projects and department roles and has the added benefit of encouraging transparency. These meetings also give staff a chance to express their opinions or voice ideas on matters that might be outside of their everyday work. All-staff meetings create a feeling of ownership and teamwork because everyone is being brought together to be made aware of the library's actions. Depending on your organization, meetings can have a bad reputation or may not be feasible, so this information can be shared via all-staff email, newsletter, or conference call. Feedback should be solicited and encouraged. The point is to show transparency and openness to input and suggestions. It is important to remember that great ideas can come from anywhere.

In some instances, all-staff meetings are not required. When a new project begins, just the staff who will be working on the assignment, end-to-end, should be involved. A project is more likely to succeed when those involved have a chance to see each step in the process. Say a library is relocating a collection. Every person from the head of collections, to shelvers, to technical staff who update records should be involved in the decision making and project planning. Problems and hidden efficiencies are easier to handle when those who know the work are at the same table to discuss how they envision their role in the project. Group meetings of this sort can also allow staff to readily adapt to changes that impact their work. The members of these groups are also more likely to communicate outside of meetings when the need arises. Creating a strong team through clear communication helps morale and fosters a sense of unity. These team meetings keep everyone on the same page and working toward their ultimate goal.

Libraries work best when every department collaborates through clear, open communication with efficient workflows and shared goals. Each department and project team is an important cog your organization's system. By instituting systems thinking, you will ensure smoother projects and everyday tasks. Everyone on your staff will benefit from increased efficiency, productivity, and knowing how their role impacts the organization as a whole.

Communities of Practice

In addition to creating a smoothly operating library system, organizations should open

communication and sharing beyond work-specific tasks. Libraries should foster communities of practice that expand its staff's general skill sets, ideas, and passions. Communities of practice are formed when groups of individuals within your organization engage in activities that lead to shared learning. Your organization can offer sharing sessions where staff discuss topics related to their work and libraries as a whole. One example of this is libraries that hold "Article Club" meetings. In these organizations, staff from all parts of the library come together to discuss the same article from a library journal or trade publication. Clubs like this can also discuss local news that impacts the library, a video or webinar, or project they are working on outside of the library, such as a volunteer experience. These sharing sessions also give staff time to boast about themselves. What projects are they working on for a professional library association or working group? Are they writing an article for a journal? Or, are they simply working on something outside of the office that they enjoy? Meetings like this can create greater feelings of collegiality between staff members from different departments who might not otherwise meet. In her book, Somerville argues for the creation of these communities of practice. 10 Silos keep people filtered by traditional departmental segments; communities of practice group people by shared interests. Further, these "communities of practice provide individuals with an identity within the workplace, which ensures a professional and/or disciplinary lens through which to perceive and inquire. This offers a vantage point from which to develop trans-disciplinary and cross functional workplace understanding."11 Crossing silos builds the bond between staff members and leads to stronger, more holistic teams. When staff start to enjoy one another and discuss shared interests, they are more likely to work well together and share ideas that benefit their work in the library.

Your library can further increase cooperation by creating moments for collaboration for these communities. In the "Google at Work" episode of NPR's *Hidden Brain* podcast, host Shankar Vedantam interviews Laszlo Bock, head of Google's People Operations, about how Google instituted the Bell Lab "bumping into" model. Bock shares that when people "stumble out of their offices and bump into each other [they] have interesting conversations." Bock says that Google tries to "manufacture these moments of serendipity" to get people from different departments having conversations. By encouraging staff to meet and share ideas as they happen, sharing and collaboration become a normal activity and mindset. Collaboration cannot be forced, but it can be encouraged and grown by fostering environments where conversations and ideas can occur organically. Staff should be encouraged to chat during coffee breaks and meet for lunch. (It's even better if you can

provide the coffee or lunch!) Their conversations may not always be directly about work, but when employees from different parts of the same organization come together, even informally, ideas are shared and explored.

A library should further encourage the holistic growth of its staff and communities of practice through professional development. Staff should be allowed to attend conferences, webinars, meetings, and to join professional associations even if the subject area is not directly applicable to their everyday work. Staff who attend these events should then be given a forum to share what they have learned. This could be as simple as giving a presentation to their interested colleagues or making their notes and materials available online. Interested parties should be encouraged to meet one-on-one to share and expand upon what they have learned. When staff attend conferences, they often come back brimming with ideas and the energy to implement new methods and programs. Leaders should encourage this eagerness and passion instead of asking staff to wait or file away what they have learned for another day. The high energy and drive of new knowledge only lasts for a short time. Staff should be encouraged to act or else their passion may dim and their time at these conferences not fully utilized. Staff who are constantly told no or to delay their ideas risk becoming cynical and defensive. 14 They may wonder what the point of attendance at these events is if they never get to experiment with or implement what they have learned. For example, if a staff member returns from a conference excited to try a new social media marketing technique, have them work with the librarian who runs the Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat accounts. These staff members can discuss the new ideas and how they can be implemented at your institution. A library should never allow their staff's skills or ideas to grow stagnant. The library world is constantly evolving and staff need the time and experience to evolve along with those changes.

Friendly, open offices encourage collegiality and teamwork. This positivity increases library morale and staff begin to work as one team because they find shared passions and are excited about working on ideas together. By allowing the communities of practices to develop, your staff will gain valuable knowledge and skills as well as strengthen relationships with their colleagues.

Mentorships and Cross-Training

People are the key to breaking down silos. They must be able to see how their individual contributions help their colleagues and the organization as a whole. One way

libraries can encourage their staff to develop a holistic library mindset is by offering mentorships across departments or traditional silos. Mentorships occur when experienced and knowledgeable staff are paired with newer, less-experienced staff members to provide guidance and and expertise. It is common for mentorships to develop within departments, but cross-departmental mentorships have the additional benefit of reminding staff about the work of the colleagues. Pairing a cataloger with a circulation librarian may seem odd, but these staff will learn how their duties impact one another and they will develop techniques and troubleshoot problems together. Staff in cross-silo mentorships can discover how their daily workflows interact, how they can merge tasks and find efficiencies in their work, and can remind everyone that they are on the same team with the shared goal of fulfilling user needs. These mentorships also allow staff to grow their skill sets and knowledge about other fields in their chosen career.

Libraries should also encourage cross-training. In her article for College and Research Libraries News, Cori Wilhelm states, "Cross-training encourages communication between departments, and training colleagues about one's particular speciality creates a sense of ownership and leadership among peers... Furthermore, when employees understand the duties and processes of another department more thoroughly, they can work together more cohesively toward the library's overall goals and mission." ¹⁵ Cross-training is when an organization has its employees learn the skills and responsibilities of another department or unit. It can involve shadowing or staff members, hands-on training, or the sharing of documentation. One example of cross-training includes when technical services staff are given training on the reference desk or circulation staff learn how to copy catalog records. Cross-training not only increases awareness, but means that the library can maintain continuity of mission critical tasks during times of disruption. 16 Cross-training means a staff member can help another department is someone is on medical leave or away on vacation. Additionally, cross-trained staff may develop innovate solutions to problems and find ways to streamline work since they bring a new perspective to the table. Our users want seamless service, and breaking down silos and encouraging teamwork can help fulfill that need.

Cross-training and cross-silo mentorships can also be extremely beneficial to the new staff on-boarding process. New hires will more easily discover how your organization works as a whole and how the library fosters and grows its staff if they are given a holistic library experience from the start. In these kinds of workplace partnerships, staff are introduced to and reminded of how their work impacts other areas of the library and the end user. New staff

should be given not only training on their new position, but also a wide-ranging orientation to all departments in the library. New staff should meet with or shadow someone in every library department during their first months on the job. This time will allow them to see the library's operations and to develop relationships and contacts that will be beneficial to future assignments and projects. By creating good habits from the start, it is less likely that new staff will fall into silos. Additionally, longer serving library staff will be able to hear fresh perspectives and insights from the new additions to the team.

Mentorships and cross-training are becoming vital parts of a thriving organization. As libraries need to do more with less and provide, in many instances, even greater levels and kinds of service, having a knowledgeable, strong staff with diverse skills across many areas will be invaluable. Staff will be able to help one another when departments or projects have a greater need for skills and support. Additionally, mentorships and cross-training ensure consistent levels of service to your patrons while allowing staff to develop professionally.

Sharing Success

Finally, a library needs to encourage its staff by sharing successes. Oftentimes silo walls are reinforced because departments rarely see the successful outcome of their work. Technical services staff have limited interaction with users so they do not see how their work helps to fulfill the library's main goal of serving users. Public Services staff interact with users, but they rarely see all the hard-work that puts books on the shelf, provides database access, and keeps a website running. Leaders should be sure to thank every staff member and department involved in major projects. The library is one organization with many moving parts. When one area grinds to a halt the others are impacted. Administrators and managers should always keep work and praise flowing through the whole library ecosystem. Milestones and accomplishments should be celebrated library-wide. The best way to do this is to share success stories at meetings, through emails, or on staff bulletin boards. Sharing accomplishments proves that the library functions better and is more successful when it operates as one unified organization.

Conclusion

To successfully break down and keep silos from returning, leaders must be persistent and patient. Silos come from long-entrenched fears, attitudes, and work environments. It takes time to implement change and keep progress moving forward. Leaders should take small

steps where they can and empower the staff who want to make changes in the right direction. The little victories will lead to larger wins. Trending successes will also start to bring on board those staff who were opposed to change in the first place. Breaking down silos is about bringing people together as one team with shared goals.

Breaking down silos hinges on one goal: keeping the big picture in mind. A library is an holistic organization composed of independent departments and individual staff members. Successful collaboration across departments comes from integrated library workflows, open lines of communication, and an holistic mindset. Breaking down silo walls does not have to be complicated nor imposed as a mandate. Library managers, administrators, and leaders should review their employee's activities to see what areas for collaboration and cooperation already exist and are working well. Such activities should be encouraged and expanded wherever possible. Then, it is a matter of introducing new techniques and moments of collaboration into existing workflows to see which methods work best for your organization. Once staff are aware that they are able to communicate better and work together on projects, most are likely to run with the idea.

Silo walls are unnecessary and harmful roadblocks. They are flawed constructs mired in outdated traditional library conventions which impede the overall success of a library and its mission. Silos split an organization into unconnected parts. This rigid mentality creates turf wars and inefficient workflows while also breeding difficult work environments through mistrust and doubt. Breaking down silo walls leads to more flexible workflows, fosters creativity and collaboration, and can lead to more productive staff relationships. This is not an easy task. It is crucial, however, that libraries integrate and collaborate if they are to operate in the current information ecosystem. The separate units of an organization should remember that they share one, ultimate goal: meeting user needs. The more roadblocks we place on ourselves, the more difficult it will be to fulfill this purpose.

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