

The StraightTalk Coach

Insights for Leading From Strength

Don't Break Down, Break Out

By Cathy A. Higgins & David J. Kreischer

For years, debate has centered on how organizations can break down silos to operate more effectively. Here is a new paradigm: Do not debate about how to break down silos. Instead, teach leaders how to break out of them. Eliminating silos requires changing the leadership mindset rather than the organization's structure.

Most companies have already flattened their organizations, effectively eliminating structural silos. They have formally and informally recognized that collaboration is the most effective strategy for competing in today's warp-speed market. Yet many leaders remain reluctant to cross traditional functional lines without express permission. Most have the freedom to do so; they simply fail to exercise it.

Why? Because behaving as though silos still exist feels less risky than changing comfortable patterns.

Yet maintaining silo-based behavior is an even greater risk that inhibits the multidisciplinary innovation and results required to succeed today. The solution: Change your leadership behavior to break out of silos – and drive greater innovation and results.

Are You Operating In a Silo?

◆ Do you have ideas for significantly enhancing your organization's

effectiveness but feel reluctant to or fail to make time to engage people from other areas in the effort?

◆ When people approach you with suggestions that require relinquishing control in favor of collaboration, is resistance your initial response?

◆ Do you believe someone from another function or business unit will not generate innovative ideas for yours?

◆ Do your individual responsibilities seem more important than your collective accountability?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you are engaging in silo behavior. It is time to break out – and watch the silos finally disappear.

Forget about breaking down silos. Instead, teach leaders how to break out of them.

A Break-out Plan

Our model of effective leadership begins with individual characteristics based on IQ and EQ. It then progresses to relational characteristics that allow a leader to manage and guide by influencing others, and thus impact the organization.

Factors that drive silo behavior typically span individual, relational and organizational characteristics. As detailed below, these same drivers also offer a plan for developing new break-out behaviors.

Change Yourself

Some individual behaviors leaders must change to break out of silos include elevating their risk orientation and ambiguity tolerance, and developing a greater receptivity to change and openness to learning.

Breaking out of silos is not without risk, although leaders typically inflate its magnitude and potential consequences. Build risk orientation by trusting your instincts and intuition instead of relying on what has worked in the past, by recognizing that occasionally being wrong is acceptable and by seeking a mentor who is known for taking bold risks.

Making the transition from silo to break-out behavior also creates ambiguity, largely because it means operating outside your area of expertise without a clear path to a final (or even defined) outcome. In addition, breaking out requires relinquishing control and allowing others to impact your area, which also fosters uncertainty. Enhance your tolerance for ambiguity by seeing “and” options instead of “or” choices,

and by developing higher levels of flexibility in thinking and adaptability of behavior.

Leaving the comfortable silo in which you have excelled also demands greater openness to learning and change, the most critical element of which is a thorough understanding of the external environment – especially emerging trends.

Suggestions for improving your openness include spending time with your organization's customers, key strategists and change agents, and seeking out highly regarded peers in other organizations.

Change Relationships

Break-out relational behaviors include enhancing respect for others, valuing diversity, building alliances and influencing others.

A lack of respect for others' knowledge and/or abilities encourages silo behavior because we rarely engage people whose abilities we dismiss or underestimate. Failing to value and leverage diversity creates a similar result of avoiding people we feel are too different from us or who have a perspective that makes us uncomfortable. Yet the best thinking results from teams that represent the broadest possible range of abilities, functional expertise and perspectives.

Improve your respect for others and appreciation of diversity by striving to understand other people's feelings, thoughts and motivations, by occasionally admitting to being wrong and honestly seeking fresh perspectives, and by consciously expanding your network to include people who come from different disciplines and who think differently than you.

Breaking out of your silo to successfully work with others also requires building alliances and influencing people through relationships instead of position power. These alliances should extend up, down, across and outside the organization, and reach the broadest possible range of stakeholders.

Approaches for augmenting alliances

include building stronger relationships horizontally, recognizing and reinforcing cross-functional linkages, and championing innovative multifunctional solutions.

Change the Organization

Changing your individual and relational behavior to break out of silos will undoubtedly affect your organization. The most significant impact will occur when leaders' break-out behavior includes acting as a Thought Catalyst and/or Change Agent, harnessing conflict productively, and engendering confidence in their ability to deliver on their commitments, respect for their style and trust in their motivations.

Your primary responsibility as a leader is to accelerate your organization's pace of learning and change. In other words, you must act as a Thought Catalyst, a Change Agent or both, orchestrating the best expertise to more quickly identify innovative solutions and implement them most effectively.

Recommendations for improving your Change Agent and Thought Catalyst behavior include stimulating broader and deeper thinking by asking "why not?" and other leading questions. To become a more effective Change Agent, develop your influence skills with an emphasis on whom you must influence to effect change, rather than on what you must accomplish.

Conflict is a vital tool for accelerating learning and change, so using it frequently and effectively can reduce silo behavior and deliver better results. The more important an issue, problem, opportunity or threat, the more vital it is to invite and use conflict to surface as many competing views as possible and wrestle to the best solution.

Apply conflict more effectively by using StraightTalk and straight listening, by encouraging and rewarding disagreement, and by seeking to understand others' views before trying to have your views understood.

A strategic perspective is also critical to influencing others. Focus your break-out

behavior on initiatives that will significantly advance your organization and encourage others to join you in those efforts. This will not only change your organization's opportunities; it will also reshape the culture away from silo behavior.

Potential Barriers

Admittedly, leadership behavior is not the only barrier to breaking out of silos. Organizations' systems and processes may also create challenges.

Compensation programs that reward individual accomplishments over collaborative contributions are common culprits, as are budget planning and resource allocation processes. If reallocating budget dollars and other resources is the only way leaders can fund collaborative initiatives, existing processes may reinforce silo behavior.

Although such obstacles may exist, leaders tend to overemphasize both their impact and difficulty. The more leaders break out of silos, the sooner organizations will modify systems to support and reward such behavior.

Ultimately, an accelerated pace of learning and innovation, continuous improvement and the most creative solutions occur between disciplines, not inside them. Leaders who are willing to risk breaking out of silo behavior and collaborate with others have the greatest potential for innovation that gives their organizations a competitive edge in the global marketplace.

Since silos today are largely about the way people behave, it is time for leaders to shape new behaviors and break out. [HK](#)

Reminder: Higgins Kreischer is now located at 125 South Wacker Drive, Suite 328, Chicago, Illinois 60606. Our new telephone numbers are: Cathy Higgins 312.893.5444 and Dave Kreischer 312.893.5443.



Additional “Break-out” Resources

The following list includes some of our favorite books that provide insights into being a more effective Break-out Leader. Read one or two that interest you. More important, use the list as the foundation for building your own bibliography of books that offer perspectives on break-out behavior. We would enjoy hearing about your favorites; email the information to us at chiggins@higginskreischer.com.

Change Yourself: Understand the role of risk orientation, ambiguity tolerance, receptivity to change and openness to learning in becoming a Break-out Leader®.

- ◆ Against The Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk by Peter L. Bernstein
- ◆ Deep Change by Robert Quinn
- ◆ Finding Our Way: Leadership For An Uncertain Time by Margaret J. Wheatley
- ◆ Lateral Thinking by Edward DeBono
- ◆ Risk Intelligence: Learning to Manage What We Don't Know by David Apgar
- ◆ The Art of Possibility by Rosamund and Benjamin Zander
- ◆ The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Process of the Learning Organization by Peter Senge
- ◆ The FISO Factor – Fit In, Stand Out by Blythe McGarvie

Change Relationships: Think about influence and alliance-building based on respect and valuing diversity to be an effective Break-out Leader®.

- ◆ Getting To Yes by Roger Fischer and William Ury
- ◆ Influence Without Authority by Allen R. Cohen and David L. Bradford
- ◆ Linked by Albert Laszlo Barabasi
- ◆ People Skills by Robert Bolton
- ◆ Power and Influence by John P. Kotter

Change the Organization: Start with an external, strategic perspective, create organizational passion for change and build commitment for sustainability as a Break-out Leader®.

- ◆ How To Think Clearly in a Time of Change by Edie Weiner and Arnold Brown
- ◆ Management Challenges for the 21st Century by Peter Drucker
- ◆ Managing People Is Like Herding Cats by Warren Bennis
- ◆ Organizational Transitions: Managing Complex Change by Richard Beckhard and Ruben T. Harris
- ◆ Peripheral Vision: Detecting the Weak Signals That Will Make or Break Your Company by George S. Day
- ◆ The Connected Corporation by Jordan D. Lewis
- ◆ The Global Brain: Your Roadmap to Innovating Faster and Smarter in a Networked World by Satish Nambisan and Mohanbir Sawhney
- ◆ The Innovator's Solution: Creating and Sustaining Successful Growth by Clayton M. Christensen and Michael E. Raynor
- ◆ The Medici Effect by Frans Johansson
- ◆ The Rise of the Creative Class by Richard Florida
- ◆ The Transformational Leader by Noel Tichy and Mary Anne DeVanna
- ◆ The World Is Flat by Thomas Friedman

