

Successful Supervisor Part 63

Reduce Silo Thinking

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

The term “silo thinking” refers to a situation when members of a team put up barriers of communication and interaction with other teams in order to protect their turf. Information and resources become trapped within the silo walls like grain is trapped inside a farm silo.

The silo problem is frequently a major issue in production departments when different supervisors have control of resources within an operation or shift. Resources are squandered when intergroup friction erupts into conflict or even sabotage. Smart supervisors take preventive actions to reduce the tendency toward silo thinking, but often they are so close to the problem, they do not recognize when it is happening right in front of them.

Reducing Silo Thinking

The first step toward eliminating the problem is to realize it is a human tendency to feel allegiance to one’s home team. In most aspects of life this bonding is a good thing because it helps teams perform at sustained peak levels. However, like most good things, too much team spirit can lead to insulation and dysfunctional competition with other groups.

Team spirit should not be wiped out, but rather expanded to include outside individuals or parallel groups. The supervisor needs to recognize this dynamic and take steps to keep team spirit at a healthy level while mitigating any negative side effects. Here are five suggestions I have found to be effective at controlling silo thinking:

1. Reinforce the Common Goal at the Next Higher Level

Two groups at odds due to silo thinking always share common goals at the next higher level. For example, on a football team, it is common for the offensive unit to become a silo separate from the defense, so the coach has to remind everybody that they are on the same team, and the enemy is external. Once people are reminded of their common allegiance to the larger effort, the parochial thinking process within the sub units is weakened.

2. Do Teambuilding for the Combined Group

Mixing two feuding groups together for a teambuilding activity allows the members to see and appreciate the resources in the other group. It is important to have a good facilitator provide excellent teambuilding activities, and the points made during the exercise debriefs are particularly important. There are several excellent teambuilding exercises that stress working across boundaries for a common goal.

One of my favorite team building activities to illustrate working together is to mix people together in random order and have them form into small groups with some members from each team in each group. Then ask them to brainstorm all the ways that performing as a high performance team is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. If you allow them to brainstorm for 15-20 minutes they will come up with all kinds of helpful concepts. For example, even though there are different parts of the scene, the whole puzzle must be completed in order to succeed, so each part of the puzzle is equally important.

3. Reinforce Behavior of the Combined Group Rather Than the Silos

The trick here is for the supervisor of Group 1 to “team up” with the supervisor of Group 2 when reinforcing good work by both groups. If the supervisors model a kind of family spirit, then people will quickly get the message and begin to think like a single unit. When trying to accomplish this larger team spirit, it is important to eliminate language that focuses on “we” and “they.”

4. Eliminate We/They Thinking and Language

A Litmus test for the elimination of silo thinking is the absence of the language that uses we and they in conversation. This problem is often evident in email exchanges. For example, note the flavor in this email, “Your group needs to realize that if you want a neat environment, you need to pick up after yourselves. We cannot be responsible for always picking up your messes. It is a sign of laziness to not pick up your own trash and we should not have to deal with it.” Note the very strong we versus you emphasis in this note.

A softer and more constructive note might be as follows, “The audit inspection turned up some trash left in the break room over the weekend. Let’s all work together to make sure our environment is neat and healthy.”

It is up to the supervisor to 1) model proper team language, and 2) insist that all people in her group refrain from using inflammatory language such as the first note above.

5. Cross Fertilization

This process involves swapping one key resource from Team 1 with another resource from Team 2. For a while the swapped resources remain emotionally linked to their former group, but eventually they become more aligned with their current group. If the

supervisor encourages a few of these swaps over time, soon it will be hard to tell which team is which, and the silo barriers will have been lowered.

This technique is often unpopular with the people being moved, so it is important to select the swapped people carefully. One legitimate way to explain the move is to let the people know they are highly valued, and the additional cross training on different functions will make their background even stronger to the organization.

The primary action for any supervisor is to be alert to the problem of silo thinking subtly creeping into the thinking process and conversations of her team. Stay close to other supervisors and be vigilant on this issue, and you can reduce a lot of organizational acrimony.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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