



Silos, Politics, and Turf Wars

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About the Author

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The Summary

Silos, Politics, and Turf Wars begins with the story of Jude Cousins, a gifted young executive who launches out to start his own consulting practice. As he works with different companies and organizations, including a hotel, a hospital, a manufacturing firm, and a church, he discovers a common problem: silos. Silos are those invisible barriers between teams or departments that keep them separated, in their own worlds, and more often competing with each other than cooperating for the greater good of the organization.

Over time Cousins learns how to help firms solve this problem by addressing the underlying issues that cause or enable them, and eventually develops an approach that any company can use.

For many companies, there is one experience that tears down silos quickly: a crisis that threatens the company's survival. In a crisis there is no time for silos; everyone is doing whatever is necessary for the company's good. Cousins asks the question: why wait for a crisis? The things that are done in a crisis can be done any time—so why wait for one? Why not do those things all the time...and maybe avoid the crisis altogether?

The fable concludes with Cousins testing his theories, successfully, in a number of different venues.

Overview

One of the most challenging aspects of leadership, and one of the most frustrating realities in any organization is the existence of silos. Whether we call it departmental politics, divisional rivalry, or turf warfare, it is common, and it exercises a significant negative impact on any company's productivity. Silos are those invisible barriers that exist between different departments in an organization, causing people who are supposed to be on the same team to work against one another.

Silos, and the turf wars they enable, devastate organizations. They waste resources, kill productivity, and hinder the achievement of goals. Beyond that is the human toll. They cause frustration and stress, and disillusion employees, who are forced to fight battles with people who should be their teammates. This stress often carries over into their personal lives and affects family and friends as well.

Sometimes silos emerge because the leaders at the top of the organization have issues with each other. Much more often it is an organizational problem, not an interpersonal one. Silos arise because executives are not doing their job: providing themselves and their employees

with a compelling context for working together. Tearing down silos requires that leaders address the core issues at the heart of the department separation and politics.

The idea of context is critical. Every organization has a context that people operate in, that informs how they make decisions, what priorities they set, etc. Without it, employees at all levels easily get lost and move in different directions, often at cross-purposes with each other.

Even the most intelligent people get distracted among the myriad of details that come their way each day. Without a compass, they get pulled in many directions and pursue seemingly good agendas, assuming that their efforts are in the best interests of the organization as a whole. However, when other employees see their colleagues moving in different directions, they wonder why. And eventually that confusion leads to disappointment and even resentment, and ultimately they can start working against those colleagues on purpose.

When they see it, leaders often assume it is due to the immaturity of the employees. Usually though, most employees want to work well with their coworkers in other divisions. The blame for silos rests at the top of the organization. They can ultimately be traced back to the leaders of the departments, because they have failed to either understand or communicate the interdependencies that must exist between the departments (and the workers in them).

Fortunately, there is a simple and powerful way for leaders to create a common sense of purpose, and a context for interdependency. They must establish a *thematic goal*, which serves as a rallying cry for the whole organization.

The Approach

The model for combatting silos consists of four components:

1. A thematic goal
2. A set of defining objectives
3. A set of standard operating objectives
4. Metrics

The *thematic goal* is a single, qualitative focus that is shared by the entire leadership team, (and ultimately by the whole organization), that applies for a specified time period.

In order to avoid turf battles, executives must establish an unambiguous common goal, a single overriding theme that will be the top priority of the entire leadership team for a given time period.

A thematic goal is not the long-term vision, nor is it a measurable objective. While both of those are important, the thematic goal lies somewhere between the two, and may well be more important than either. That's because it makes the vision more tangible and gives the tactical objectives more context.

Let's break those elements down:

Single. There can only be one thematic goal. There will certainly be other desires and objectives, but none of them can be pursued at the expense of the thematic goal. Every organization needs a top priority. Although almost all companies are tempted to add one or two "top priorities," it defeats the idea of a thematic goal, which is to make clear whatever is *truly* most important. "If everything is important, then nothing is." Something has to be number one.

Thematic. The thematic goal is not a number, nor is it measurable. It is a general statement of a desired accomplishment. It requires a verb, because it calls people to *do* something: *improve, increase, grow, change, establish*, etc.

Time-bound. The thematic goal does not live forever; it is a desired achievement that is particularly important during that period of time, and must be accomplished in that period. Usually that is 3-12 months, depending on the organization.

Shared. The thematic goal applies to everyone on the leadership team, regardless of their expertise or department. While sometimes a thematic goal will fit largely within one executive's area of responsibility, it is critical that all team members take responsibility for it. That means they will need to remove their "functional" hats (that say *finance* or *sales* or *marketing*), and put on a generic one that says *executive*. And they will have to be willing to make suggestions and ask questions about areas other than their own.

The second component of the model is the **defining objectives**. Once the thematic goal has been set, the leadership must clarify what must be done to accomplish the goal. These goals are *qualitative*, and are shared by the whole team. It is critical that the whole team takes responsibility for achieving these objectives if silos are going to be avoided.

Note: these are qualitative goals, not quantitative ones. Executives are often tempted to assign numbers and dates too quickly, but that only serves to limit the involvement of those who can't see how they can directly impact a numerical target. Before metrics can be identified, it must be determined what the key objectives are that must be accomplished in order to meet the thematic goal.

Defining objectives are also time-bound; when the thematic goal changes, so do the objectives, since their purpose is to focus energies on accomplishing the particular thematic goal.

Standard Operating Objectives are the other key objectives that a leadership team must focus on and monitor. These aren't necessarily connected to the thematic goal; these are the ongoing objectives that don't change from period to period. They might include topics like revenue, expenses, or customer satisfaction—things you must always pay attention to, regardless of the thematic goal. A thematic goal *could* include one of those categories, but doesn't necessarily.

The difference is that a thematic goal is a specific focus for a unique period of time; standard operating objectives are continuous.

Once all of these are clear, it's time to talk about measurement. (Without these other areas sorted out, metrics have little or no context, and even the most driven of employees will not be as motivated for hitting the numbers if they don't understand how they fit into the bigger picture). Metrics are not always quantifiable numbers; often they are dates by which a given activity will be completed.

Identifying a Thematic Goal

The key to finding the right thematic goal is to not try and rush to a conclusion, but let the team discuss it for a while. Often the first guess will be one of the defining objectives rather than the thematic goal.

For example, imagine a manufacturing firm that has a defective product that could hurt people. "Fix the product" would be a natural first guess at the thematic goal. However, a better answer might be "rebuild our credibility in the market." That would certainly include fixing the product, but if that's the only thing the company does it would still have problems.

Once that goal is set, the leadership team needs to keep it alive in the organization. This will happen in the regular staff meetings, where progress needs to be reviewed and discussed on an ongoing basis.

A simple way to accomplish this is by a quick review of defining objectives and standard operating objectives. Set up a scoreboard--each item can be given a green, yellow or red rating depending on whether it is on track, behind, or stalled. This gives the team a general understanding of how they are doing.

Once this is done the team can talk about where to spend its time and energy to move things forward. Anything that is behind or stalled will be a topic for conversation, and everyone on the leadership team, regardless of specific area of responsibility, needs to pitch in to move things forward.

It's important that the team focuses on the areas that are falling behind. It's common for executives to try to give equal attention to every topic, issue, or department regardless of how important it is. That feels fair, but isn't particularly productive. Meetings become a time when everyone talks about their own department, and silos are reinforced rather than torn down.

Without the clarity of a scoreboard to focus attention on particular areas, it is very difficult to avoid this. And without the existence of a thematic goal, it would be all but impossible.

Long-Term

When a thematic goal runs its course and is accomplished, an organization must then come up with another, and then another. Shouldn't all of this be part of a longer-term strategic direction? Yes—with some caveats.

Leaders often choose one of two extremes in planning:

1. They have no real long-range plan and make only short-term, reactive decisions.
2. They have a highly detailed three- or five- year strategic plan

Either possibility can lead to problems. Successful organizations achieve a delicate balance between having a longer term focus and responding to unexpected circumstances along the way. A thematic goal provides the context because it exists within a framework of six to twelve months, a time frame that most businesses can accurately manage. Longer than that and plans often become irrelevant; shorter than that and it becomes difficult to actually address something difficult.

One final note: when a thematic goal is clearly established and communicated, employees should be able to look up from their work at any given time and see how they're contributing to an outcome that is far enough away to give them the ability to succeed, but not so far away that they cannot imagine ever being finished. They should be able to see how the company's long-term vision connects to its short-term objectives.



From the Pastor's Perspective

As I was writing this, I received a newsletter on leadership that I subscribe to. Here is what it said:

Most executives are deeply frustrated by their company's approach to strategic decision-making, a Booz & Co. survey found. More than half say their company's strategy isn't helping it achieve its goals, almost two-thirds say their strategic visions are a tangled mess of conflicting priorities, and more than four-fifths say their strategic planning leads to waste and lost productivity. That suggests most firms are paying an "incoherence penalty" for failing to develop strategies that make the most of their strengths...

Sounds like a silo problem! I suspect each of these firms could benefit from a thematic goal.

Silos seem to be a problem in almost every type of organization; certainly churches are no exception. I think it can look a little different in churches than in businesses. In churches, it is not as much competition for resources as much as everyone doing their own thing and not being mindful of the bigger picture. I've not seen people fighting over budgets very much, but I have seen competition for time and for prominence. Whose event gets priority in scheduling; who gets announced from the pulpit, etc. All of those are still indicators of silos.

I have used the thematic goal approach for several years, although I learned some new things from Lencioni. I have usually set my metrics too early instead of setting qualitative goals. For example, I would set "seeing 20 people saved this year" as the thematic goal, rather than "become an evangelistic church." That's something I need to change—while some of us find numbers motivating, most people don't (at least that's what my wife keeps telling me). I think she's right. I naturally connect numbers to changed lives; most of the people in the pews equate it with an unhealthy focus on growth, or that we don't care about people for themselves but only as a number, etc. It's much easier for them to buy into a qualitative goal than a quantitative or numeric one.

I thought it might be helpful to show how you might walk out Lencioni's approach in a church setting.

Let's say, for example, that your leadership team identifies "becoming effectively evangelistic" as the year's thematic goal.

The next step is to develop the defining objectives. Those could include:

1. Develop a follow-up system
2. Train a group of mentors to disciple new believers
3. Develop a strategy for outreach

Then comes the standard operating objectives—the things we do on an ongoing basis to keep the church healthy. These might be:

1. Develop the small group ministry
2. Continue raising up new leaders
3. Cultivate a prayer ministry
4. Increase the number of serving opportunities

After that come metrics—things you will measure to know if you are getting a “win.” For example, develop a new believer packet by April 1, or create three new small groups by June 1. (Metrics include dates and measurements).

If you don't have an effective approach to planning, I recommend Lencioni's approach. It works, and isn't hard to learn how to use it.