

The Center For Modeling Optimal Outcomes® LLC

“The Think Tank for Creativity & Innovation”®

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Silos: The “Real” Explanation

As part of its ongoing research into the impacts of the application of neuroscience in business, the Center for Modeling Optimal Outcomes®, LLC has prepared this document in an effort to provide insight into organizational “silos.”

Often referred to intra-organizationally as politics between departments, infighting or favoritism resulting from reporting relationships, organizational silos are easily identified as one of the primary impediments for creativity, innovation and the ability to create a culture of change acceptability.

As quasi-cultures, silos exist within nearly all organizations; including academia, banking, scientific research, manufacturing, retail sales, etc. Considering the fact that an individual’s thoughts release neurohormones enabled us to view the psychodynamics of silos from the perspective of neurobiology (mix of neurohormones and configuration of neural architecture based on habitual thought patterns that create “wiring”).

Rather than delve into the scientific foundation that creates organizational silos at this point, we will leave that explanation until later in the document after explaining the process from a lay (practical) perspective.

To fully understand the dynamics associated with silos required our interdisciplinary think tank to answer each of the following questions:

- How and why do silos emerge?
- Which group dynamics hold them together?
- What, if any, are the benefits derived from silos?
- How can they be replaced or enhanced (if they have some value)?
- What aspects of the structures of silos are consistent throughout organizations?
- Is their existence planned and, if so, by whom?

During the investigative process, it became obvious that the behavioral characteristics within silos (cultures) are somewhat tribal and influenced by herd mentality (driven by a combination of neurobiological factors). This insight “opened the door” for us to examine group dynamics as they impact management structures, organizational development, and leadership. As we progressed from research in traditional business dynamics and into the biology (neuroscience) that drives decision-making, we were able to convert the sources of tacit thought processes into explicit methodologies based on a solid foundation in science that is provided in the summary comments.

Researching the analogies between tribal behavior and management practices led us to a 2005 book, *Deep Smarts*.¹ The authors, Dorothy Leonard and Walter Swap, outlined the three

¹ Dorothy Leonard and Walter Swap, *Deep Smarts*, Harvard Business School Publishing, Boston, MA,

primary social change influencers as being group think, herd mentality and tribal behavior. The latter, upon close examination, showed some similarities with silo behavior; i.e., driven to some degree by thoughts relative to the need for survival.

As a point of clarification for the differences between two of the survival driven thought processes, herd mentality and tribal behaviors, we offer the following:

- a. Herd Mentality – people react to the “take advantage of it while you can” belief. Usually the action is prompted by scarce resources including, but not limited to a time window. Care must be exercised to neutralize negative reactions from a group of individuals within a larger group. Failure to react swiftly can result in having a larger number of people agree with the dissenting view until the number hits the “tipping point” and the group thinks like a herd/mob and “stampedes.”

One example of herd mentality dominant in medical research is “informational cascade;” i.e. accepting an assumption that was promoted as a fact merely because, based on then current technology and theory, it offered a logical explanation for a medical mystery. As one example of such information cascade, only recently has medical science started to learn that synthetic vitamins and nutritional supplements may not be nearly as helpful as originally thought and may, in fact, be harmful to some individuals.

- b. Tribal Behavior – action based on a common discipline of people is often influenced by the leader or perceived role model. An example would be a professional society and a change of mind could be prompted by “it’s the thing to do in order to support the group” philosophy put forth by the leader or oversight group (e.g. board).

Often, individuals see the outcomes of sub-groups within the organization or of other groups within a particular industry and decide to change their belief or opinions in order to replicate the results. An example of such behavior is the common problem of having sales personnel band together to react to operations personnel; regardless of whether or not the salespersons are friendly or agree on other issues. An analysis of the hospital industry indicated such tribal behavior is often visible when administrators attempt to sway the opinions of the medical staff en masse - resulting in defensive (survival driven) reactions.

Whether the challenge for an organization is transforming, creating, cultivating or maintaining a results oriented culture, the critical factor for success is building intra-organizational cohesion and collaboration. Unfortunately, this challenge is far more difficult to achieve than it may seem. Even superficial research into organizational dynamics of nearly every industry clearly indicates a distinct lack of cohesion and collaboration between all organizational levels but especially between middle managers and between middle management as a whole and the executive level. As a result of these deficiencies, the full potential of maximizing existing internal resources and organizational intelligence is wasted.

Note: The chasm of communication is a critical factor because, aside from fostering silos created and maintained because of dysfunctional communication between executives and middle management, this same factor can create silos between executives and/or middle

managers and employees. At the employee level, these silos can result in the formation of unions.

In essence, unions become another set of sub-cultures. Viewed through this lens, the dynamics of the relationship between management and labor becomes somewhat easier to understand. As part of the study of that dynamic, the analogy of comparing silos to cultures is meaningful when one realizes that no one can change a culture but the “members” of the culture.

Using Hospitals as an Example

Upon close scrutiny, observers of the hospital industry soon realize departments such as a pharmacy, laboratory, radiology, surgery, etc. compete for fiscal resources (i.e. survival driven thought processes). In addition, the managers of these departments have different regulatory criteria and standards set by their respective “professional” organizations, separate clinical and quality metrics, budgetary restrictions, and each is held accountable for patient care outcomes related to their sphere of influence. In essence, these “silos” think and act as if they were independent businesses. This mentality is compounded by the many separate sub-silos that exist within departments such as radiology, laboratory or the nursing department. The medical staff is even more complex because, not only is each specialty a silo, the separate and competing groups of practitioners within each silo adds to the dilemma. (Note: From the aspect of neurobiology, habitual thought patterns relative to decisions that support intra-silo cohesion form neural wiring (neuroplasticity). It is such “hard wired” thought processes that make change acceptability nearly impossible. At the same time, “wiring” within organizational silos also prevents the creation of organizational camaraderie and inter-departmental esprit des corps; essential ingredients to reduce stress, minimize errors, and decrease turnover in nearly all industries.

Such silos exist within most industries in this country. This fact is unnerving because, as corporate complexity and the number of sub-specialties grow at an astounding pace, essential organization-wide cohesion and collaboration deteriorates in synch with this debilitating and rapidly expanding phenomenon. An example of the seriousness of this dilemma is the lack of true interdisciplinary cohesion in researching many of the debilitating and deadly disease entities; i.e. each sub-specialty is incapable of appreciating the potential for cross-pollination of state-of-the-art knowledge between disciplines. Only recently have two fledgling disciplines emerged that are attempting to reverse this trend; i.e. complexity science and integrative medicine. Each of these two concepts will be explained later in this document.

Underlying psychological factors behind the existence of silos

As part of our research into the creation of processes to eliminate or minimize the negative impact of silos, we devoted considerable time to investigating the evolution of group dynamics driven by neurobiology.

Using our unique process for root cause analysis, our research identified the following psychological factors driven by neurobiological factors that impact groups, teams, work units or entire corporations. It should be noted that, the following are merely examples and they are not intended to be all-inclusive for all industries:

- As predominantly detail oriented individuals, middle managers typically think in a manner that places a high value on control. Due to their status in hierarchal structures, most middle managers feel unable to control their own destiny due to environmental

and organizational factors beyond those they can influence directly. As a result of their somewhat instinctual need for control (survival), they tend to focus on what they can influence – their department and its contribution to the organization as a whole.

- Human nature leads us to prefer living and working in groups (i.e. tribes)
- As part of their need to protect their “tribe,” middle managers often tend to think in terms of gaining an advantage over “competing” departments or business units when exposed to factors such as sharing a budget, recognition of accomplishments in comparison to others, isolation from potential reductions in workforce (i.e., extinction), etc. As a result, often unknowingly, they tend to minimize cross-functional (cultural) collaboration.
- Tribes/silos/departments in technically or clinically based industries frequently develop their own terminologies or “language.” This phenomenon has several impacts. First, it necessitates that only individuals “expert” in the respective “language” are employed to work in that unit. Second, individuals with expertise in any given subject or sub-topic think within the confines of the respective mental model. As such, much of what these individuals hear or see is interpreted to be within their “mental river” from “their” perspective. Often, the interpreting individual “is lost” in the rest of any dialogue outside of that perspective. Accordingly, almost instinctively they tend to prefer to associate and communicate with others of their “same species.” (While many business professionals would vehemently disagree, this phenomenon is frequently behind the preference to hire personnel with the same educational background as the manager/superior; i.e. MBAs prefer MBAs. Third, as a result of hiring people who think like or in the same mental model as the remainder of the unit, department or team; organizations enabled Group Think to be created – not from the aspect of “what” is being thought as the concept is traditionally perceived but from “how” the group perceives an issue or problem. The outcomes of this operational weakness include but are not limited to the inability to innovate outside the sphere of the group’s “mental river,” self-isolation of a group into a silo because inter-disciplinary communication is frequently sub-optimal (often confusing and can lead to errors resulting from miscommunication), or restricting the degree of collaboration and cohesion to inter-disciplinary initiatives which are “dumbed down” into a lower common denominator of “language.” Regardless of which of the aforementioned dynamics drive the formation of silos, the resulting impact on organizational effectiveness becomes “good enough” solutions rather than optimal outcomes.
- In order to maintain the importance and stature of their silo/culture/tribe, departments promote the use of their own language, levels of certification required by its professional organization, and terms which are specific to its base of expertise; e.g., legal, engineering, medical research, etc. This phenomenon compounds operational problems as complexity grows and each sub-specialty establishes its own sub-culture.
- In the United States, our society, unlike many foreign countries, does not have a unified culture. For the most part, cultural traditions, even those associated with the religions of many of our ancestors have faded from generation to generation since our ancestors immigrated to this country. Basic to the thought processes that have evolved as being the norm within our society (our “human nature”), we have a need to belong to groups (tribes/silos) due to our survival instincts. Unknowingly, in our efforts to secure income (work endeavors) most of us act and react within our environment to protect and perpetuate the prosperity of our silo.

As part of our research regarding the application of neuroscience in business, education and psychology, we came upon the book, *The One Thing You Need to Know*², where author Marcus Buckingham describes the work of anthropologist Donald Brown in compiling a compendium of 372 universal human traits³. From that list, Buckingham trimmed the list to outline five universal fears and identified corresponding needs all people share. While admitting that his list was not exhaustive, he attempted to highlight the primary fears that should command the attention of individuals who are attempting to lead people. These five “universals” of fear and needs (actually thought processes that release survival neurohormones) are⁴:

1. Fear of Death (our own and our family’s) – The Need for Security
2. Fear of the Outsider – The Need for Community
3. Fear of the Future – The Need for Clarity
4. Fear of Chaos – The Need for Authority
5. Fear of Insignificance – The Need for Respect

We agree with Buckingham’s advice that effective leaders should “...identify which of the five should command your greatest attention as a leader”⁵. However, organizationally speaking, these pairings of fears and needs should be carefully evaluated because they tie directly to the previously mentioned factors that contribute to the formation and continuation of silos (i.e. the formation of neural architecture through neural plasticity that will be addressed later in this document). In fact, close scrutiny provides a management epiphany – operational mechanisms must be created to meet all of the needs of the employees with regard to these “universals.” Failure to do so will drive their need to form and maintain operational silos.

While subject to varying interpretations by psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists, Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs also provides the evidence for people’s reactions and actions when faced with challenges (fears). Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is typically expressed in a five level pyramid, which, as its base, has physiological (neurobiological needs) followed in ascending order by 2. Safety and security, 3. Love - belonging and friendship, 4. Status - self-respect and respect of others, and 5. Actualization/self-actualization (i.e., striving to be the best that we can be as well as making use of our unique abilities).

Regardless of the exact sequence of “drivers” which contribute to the formation of silos or the name of the individual who initially put forth the theory, our fears and our needs are part of our subconscious thought processes and the science of neurobiology dramatically impacts the group dynamics within our work environment.

During The Center’s extensive R&D process, it became obvious that organizations must empower their middle managers and key staff members to establish processes to address these needs. To be effective, these processes, in essence, have to create an overarching culture within the organization to neutralize or minimize “fears” by providing solutions to meet the needs of all members of the organization.

² Marcus Buckingham, *The One Thing You Need to Know*, FREE PRESS, New York, NY, 2005

³ Donald Brown, *Human Universals*, McGraw-Hill, New York, NY, 1991

⁴ Marcus Buckingham, *The One Thing You Need to Know*, FREE PRESS, New York, NY, 2005, p.137-141

⁵ *Ibid*, p.137

Group or team based neural architecture

While the book *Primal Leadership* (HBS Press 2002) authored by Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee was not intended to serve as a reference for neurobiological aspects in business applications, it offers a good explanation of the process whereby business professionals are swayed by the moods and comments of others. They referenced the scientific explanation of the concept as being one of an “open-loop” process when they wrote, “Scientists describe the open-loop as ‘interpersonal limbic regulation,’ whereby one person transmits signals that can alter hormone levels, cardiovascular function, sleep rhythms and even immune function inside the body of another.”⁶ They then differentiated between open and closed loop systems by offering, “...scientists have begun to call the open-loop nature of the limbic system, our emotional centers. A closed loop system such as the circulatory system is self-regulating; what’s happening in the circulatory system of others around us does not impact our own system. An open-loop system depends largely on external sources to manage itself.”⁷

Unbeknownst to the authors of the book, they were describing the processes associated with the dynamics of sub-sets of neurobiological activities that occur through group or team thought processes.

Additional information contained in *Primal Leadership* that provided insight into how vulnerable our minds are to the moods and actions of others included the following: “Researchers have seen again and again how emotions spread irresistibly in this way whenever people are near one another, even when the contact is completely non-verbal. For example, when three strangers sit facing each other in silence for a minute or two, the one who is most emotionally expressive transmits his or her mood to the other two - without speaking a single word.”⁸ The same effect holds in the office, boardroom, or shop floor; people in groups at work inevitably ‘catch’ feelings from one another, sharing everything from jealousy and envy to angst and euphoria. The more cohesive the group, the stronger the sharing of moods, emotional history, and even hot buttons.”⁹ (Note: For reference purposes, we have footnoted the sources listed by Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee).

What makes the concept of the aforementioned group dynamics particularly noteworthy for corporate America is the critical impact that negativism, including but not limited to the inappropriate use of devil’s advocacy as a manifestation of cynicism, can have on our moods. In essence, the open loop process serves as one of the many idiosyncrasies of our mind; i.e. being unconsciously swayed or influenced by the comments or moods of others that release the corresponding negative neurohormones and open the possibility that negative habitual thoughts can become “wired” through neuroplasticity.

⁶ Limbic regulation: Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon, *A General Theory of Love* (New York: Random House, 2000)

⁷ Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA, 2002, p 6-7

⁸ Expressiveness transmits moods: Howard Friedman and Ronald Riggio, “Effect of Individual Differences in Nonverbal Expressiveness on Transmission of Emotion,” *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 6 (1981): 32-58

⁹ Groups have moods: Janice R. Kelly and Sigal Barsade, “Moods and Emotions in Small Groups and Work Teams,” working paper, Yale School of Management, New Haven, Connecticut, 2001

Summary

The dynamics behind the formation of silos (cultures) within organizations are a direct byproduct of the aspects of neurobiology associated with neurohormones and neuroplasticity. Unfortunately, current state-of-the-art business processes do not encompass the application of neuroscience. While this document is not intended to provide a comprehensive explanation of the principles of the sub-sets of neurobiology that drive decision making and subconscious thought processes, it will hopefully introduce these concepts as a means of gaining insight into the reasons for change inertia and the lack of organizational cohesion.

It should be noted, in the same manner as other cultures, the extinction of silos is nearly impossible unless the principles associated with remediation of neural architecture are utilized. Failure to use the aforementioned concepts may disrupt existing organizational cultures and further inhibit cohesion and collaboration throughout the organization by further strengthening the disruptive and dysfunctional aspects of silos. It is also essential to understand that competition over resources (survival based), breeds silos and the intensification of such competition strengthens them.

Hope on the Horizon

As mentioned previously, two fledgling disciplines are slowly making an impact on minimizing some of the debilitating consequences of silos (i.e. complexity science and integrative medicine) and a third one is currently being introduced by The Center for Modeling Optimal Outcomes® (i.e. Integrative Medical Research). While this document would be far too lengthy if it were to contain a detailed description of these concepts, further investigation by organizational development professionals is warranted and essential. The following explanations provide a basic overview of the three disciplines.

- Complexity Science – “Complexity science addresses the aspects of living systems that are neglected or understood in traditional approaches. Existing models in economics, management and physics were built on the foundation of Newtonian scientific principles. The dominant metaphor in Newtonian science is the machine. The universe and all its subsystems are seen as giant clocks or inanimate machines. The clocks or machines can be explained using reductionism – by understanding each part separately. The whole of the machine is the sum of its parts – whether a human body or a human organization. The parts are controlled by a few immutable external forces or laws.”¹⁰

Overcoming the mental models associated with thinking of businesses as machines and employees as parts, complexity science uses a truly multi-disciplinary approach to create the mindset of business as a living organism – a process that reconfigures the philosophies of leadership and inter-disciplinary communication. Professionals compromising complexity science as a discipline include but are not limited to biologists, anthropologists, economists, sociologists, specialists in organizational development and others striving to enhance processes associated with complex adaptable and changeable systems.

¹⁰ Brenda Zimmerman, Curt Lindberg and Paul Plsek, Edgware: Insights from Complexity Science for Health Care Leaders, VHA, Irving, TX, 1998, p.4

Unfortunately, because the process of converting organization wide mindsets is formidable and nearly impossible unless silos are minimized with the creation of a new overarching culture, widespread acceptance of the concept has not materialized.

- Integrative Medicine – Although slow in gaining wide-spread acceptance due to decades of the ensconced medical community positioning models of care other than the traditional medical doctor (M.D.) as being akin to being a “quack,” the popularity of this discipline is finally growing in the US.

Similar to concepts associated with complexity science, this discipline draws upon the input and knowledge on a broad base of alternative and complementary disciplines that include but are not limited to traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), acupuncture, Reiki (a Japanese iteration of complementary medicine), message therapy, Ayurvedic (Hindu medicine), homeopathy, Anthroposophically Extended Medicine (AEM) and disciplines associated with meditation and psychology.

Unfortunately, the lack of scientific evidence and claims by many detractors who practice traditional medicine that complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) is pseudoscientific and ineffective, have made efforts to integrate the knowledge from the various CAM disciplines into a cohesive approach to the care and treatment of patients a difficult process. Much like the acceptance of acupuncture and osteopathic medicine were resisted by the traditional medical community since the advent of traditional medical schools, CAM is emerging as viable but the pace is being hindered greatly by the unwillingness of the established medical community (the profession as a comprehensive silo), to acknowledge its potential benefits.

The concept of integrative thinking and its application in the field of science is not a new one. Minimally, it dates back to 1897 when Thomas C. Chamberlin published his opinions regarding the value of utilizing multiple working hypotheses (integrated thinking) instead of linear thought processes as a means to further science.¹¹

Integrative Research – With the nation poised to enter an era of personalized medicine using integrative care to address the full sphere of health care, one major obstacle stands in the way – integrative thinking in medical research. Only recently has the National Research Council (NRC) addressed this critical shortcoming. Unfortunately, the challenge will require substantial funding and the ability to overcome change inertia from the scientific community.

The following link provides information regarding the announcement by the NRC. (<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/09/090917111623.htm>)

Using the processes identified as a foundation, over a four year period, teams within The Center have created a new iteration of complexity science coupled with integrative thinking to transform many aspects of biological processes that will be the foundation for integrative personalized medicine. Due to their length and complexity, that cannot be provided as part of this document. They are, however, available upon request from MBoe@MCFIP.net

Summary of Neurobiological Involvement in Silos

¹¹ <http://www.accessexcellence.org/RC/AB/BC/chamberlin.html>

Optimal interdisciplinary dialogue cannot occur unless participants utilize integrative thinking; i.e. the ability to think in terms of multiple disciplines and overcome dysfunctional communication due to semantic differences of terminologies between domains.

From the aspect of evolutionary physiology, human's neurohormones drive behavior based on thought processes. All thoughts (subliminal, subconscious and conscious) relative to meeting one's needs release survival driven neurohormones; i.e. adrenaline (anger – annoyance), aldosterone (fear – anxiety) or norepinephrine (focus – attention).

Neurobiologically, the behavior of the human race evolved based on the release of neurohormones relative to logic and emotions. Decision making relative to meeting one's needs prompts the release of one or more of the aforementioned three survival neurohormones.

Survival often depends upon support from other individuals. Herd mentality, group think and tribal behavior are all manifestations of survival driven thought processes and are the underlying forces that create cultures. In today's business world (including but not limited to corporate cultures, academia, organizations created to support one's career) linkage of thought processes to strengthen one's ability to survive and thrive are, in reality, cultures. Closely examined, organizational silos are also cultures. Unfortunately, when individuals representing multiple silos attempt to communicate with each other with optimal efficiency and effectiveness, "cultural" difference inhibit the process. In essence, a "Tower of Babel" scenario takes place and efforts for inter-disciplinary integrative thinking are severely restricted.

World renowned neuroscientists have irrefutably proven that one's habits of thought (repetitive thoughts) create neural wiring (neural architecture) that facilitates subliminal thoughts that lead to behaviour. These processes are referred to as being the result of neuroplasticity.

Because neuroscientists are not savvy in business applications nor are business professionals savvy in neuroscientific applications (i.e. the two silos do not communicate inter-disciplinarily), the simple fact that one's business and personal decision making processes are the result of the dynamics of neuroplasticity have been overlooked. At the same time, recent discovery of mirror neurons by neuroscientists and the impact of their application in business has not been identified. Tacitly, however, business world is becoming aware of their existence. As merely one example of the business application of the outcomes of mirror neurons, their impact on team members and leaders in group dynamics was explained quite well by Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee in *Primal Leadership* – HBS Press 2002. We made reference to their explanation starting on page six (6) of this document.