Silos

"Getting people who have different agendas to work together is amongst the biggest obstacles facing business…" Florence Stone, 2004

Silos are one of the most persistent challenges within organisations, shaping how people interact, share information, and ultimately deliver results. They appear in different forms, and recognising these is the first step toward addressing them.

Broadly, there are four types:

- Structural: when departments operate independently with little interaction with the rest of the business.
- Cultural: when departmental loyalty is stronger than organisational loyalty.
- Technological: occur as a result of departments using different, and sometimes incompatible, systems or tools.
- Hierarchal: when communication is restricted by levels of authority, impeded collaboration.

Historically, silos were considered efficient. By clustering expertise into discrete areas, workforces could be streamlined, responsibilities clearly defined, and authority neatly distributed. Today, the modern business environment is fast, interdependent, and knowledge-driven. So in this context, silos impede mobility, slow down decision-making, and fracture collaboration. Instead of clarity, they often produce confusion, duplicated efforts, misaligned goals, and a breakdown of communication, cooperation, and coordination.

It is often recognised that the flow of information must move *horizontally* between teams as much as *vertically* through lines of authority. Without this lateral exchange, knowledge is hoarded rather than shared, and an organisation loses its ability to respond quickly to change.

At their core, silos are not just structural problems, they're a cultural phenomenon. Silos create division and internal competition, preventing diversity of thought and reinforcing sub-cultures that are exclusionary. Departments might distance

themselves with spoken phrases such as "that's nothing like us", or "that's definitely a them problem" which signals lack of unity to other teams.

Humans are naturally social creatures and gravitate toward groups that provide identity and support. Silos are not inherently negative and in the right environment, can provide belonging, expertise, and stability. A sense of team identity can strengthen resilience, create trust, and foster innovation within smaller groups.

However, if you remember being an awkward child, belonging to the clique can be conditional, and exclusion can be harsh. Those who don't fit the unspoken rules of the silo may feel isolated, side-lined, or even punished for nonconformity. The danger arises when these smaller cultures overshadow the shared organisational purpose, and when loyalty to the silo outweighs collaboration across boundaries.

Humans are humans, and these behaviours are evident across all industries, with Edgar H. Schein (1996) noting that fishermen and miners develop similar attitudes within their occupations, despite national origin.

KrakenFlex, a clean-energy technology company acquired by Octopus Energy in 2020, experienced the familiar challenges of silos during a period of rapid growth. As their workforce almost tripled and operations scaled dramatically, teams encountered the classic problem of "one hand not knowing what the other is doing."

Leadership recognised that as the company grew, people needed clarity and connection to the bigger picture, otherwise fragmentation would intensify. To address this, they made company goals more visible, opened up communication through regular updates, and reassured employees that opportunities extended beyond their immediate teams.

This example illustrates that organisational cultures are not predestined but are shaped by the values, behaviours, and choices of leaders at every level. As Florence Stone (2004) notes, "turfism" emerges from competitive over collaborative cultures, unclear policies, and insufficient interpersonal training.

Leadership style matters too. Managers who model open dialogue, encourage healthy conflict, and stand firm on ethical standards create environments where silos are less likely to calcify. Personality and management styles of leaders can become

a role model for teams, such as encouraging respect of ideas and recognition of needs. As important is the strength of management in standing up for morels within leadership meetings.

The behaviour we tolerate is the standard we set.

For 'squashed' middle managers who are between strategic demands from above and operational pressures from below, the challenge is acute. They must ask themselves: *What culture do I want to create in my team? What behaviours will I reward, and which will I refuse to normalise?* Even small choices such as inviting cross-team collaboration, acknowledging contributions from outside the department and setting joint goals, can chip away at silo mentality.

Leadership at this level is about influence rather than authority, modelling the culture you want to see ripple outward. It's not about dismantling the silos, it's about the balance of retaining the specialised teams while ensuring the benefits of knowledge, trust and accountability flow across team boundaries.

And this is where support matters. Most leaders already know they should "communicate more" or "set clearer goals," but the gap lies in doing it consistently, in ways that fit their unique team and organisational culture. That's why I developed my programme to help leaders hold themselves accountable, embed these cultural shifts into everyday practice, and build the habits that prevent silos from reforming.

Because silos aren't just structures to be broken down, they're behaviours to be reshaped, and behaviours change when leaders have the right frameworks, feedback, and accountability.