Bridging Organizational Divides:
From Distrust to Cross-Team Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

As most projects span multiple departments and organizations, project leaders are increasingly challenged to align teams with differing business objectives, connect often contradictory working cultures, and mentor staff in developing best practices for collaboration. This paper reviews the benefits of applying elements of organizational design to a cross-team project environment. The paper utilizes a case study from a large healthcare system to demonstrate that structural linking mechanisms can be deployed to establish lasting alignment across multiple departments. By using cross-unit groups and integrator roles, the program manager increased collaboration, knowledge sharing, and helped solidify a sense of shared goals across the teams.

Key Words: collaboration, organizational design, leadership, linking mechanisms, project management, change management

BACKGROUND

Have you ever been on a project where cross-team dysfunction almost brought all forward progress to a halt? What if you had to work with a team that was more risk-adverse, or sales-focused, or driven by personality types radically different from your own organization? This happened to me.

My team was co-developing a clinical software system with a large healthcare information technology (IT) vendor. The team's success was tied to both development of the clinical applications, as well as successful deployment of the software across several hospital sites. As with any complex IT project, there was a large risk the clinical systems would not be deployed in a timely manner. In fact, surveys of software projects around the world show that less than a third of IT project implementations could be deemed successful, with most projects categorized as "challenged", and 19% are considered failures. (Standish Group, 2015) The risk to my program, came not from the external vendor, but from a team internal to my own organization.

To achieve our goals, my team was heavily dependent on an operational team supporting legacy IT systems who we needed to execute a product roll out of the clinical applications. The operational team was neither ready, nor even happy to take on such a large IT and business change we presented them. Bridging the gap between the two departments did not come easy. At times it seemed the two organizations were not aligned on the goals of the program, and actively working in opposition of each other!

Most projects span multiple departments and organizations. As project leaders, we are increasingly challenged to: align teams with differing business objectives, connect often contradictory working cultures, form open lines of communication, and help teams develop best practices for collaboration. (Pinto, 1991)

As we know, collaboration in the business environment is both necessary and widespread. However, it is by no means uniformly successful, with recent studies finding that nearly 75% of cross-functional teams are dysfunctional. (Tabrizi, 2015) Successful collaboration is hard. We all experience this in our day-to-day jobs. And as I learned at my current organization, aligning cross-organizational teams is extremely tricky!

BARRIERS TO COLLABORATION

Why does coordination fail within organizations? Why is it hard for teams to work together? There are several major factors that come into play that may raise obstacles to cross-team collaboration (see Figure 1).
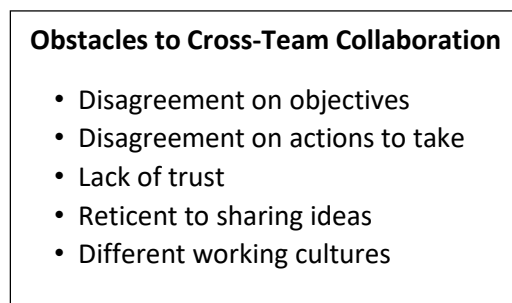
> **Obstacles to Cross-Team Collaboration**
>
> - Disagreement on objectives
> - Disagreement on actions to take
> - Lack of trust
> - Reticent to sharing ideas
> - Different working cultures

Figure 1. Common Obstacles to Collaboration.

First there may be disagreement on objectives and goals. If teams are not working toward the same business goals, then coordination and collaboration will be limited.

A related obstacle is disagreement on what actions to take to achieve common objectives across the teams. Who here has not worked in organizations with shared goals, but different teams wanted to take different approaches to reaching those goals?

Lack of trust. It is hard to trust other people, especially when your professional success depends on them. Fellow colleagues and co-workers are not your friends – you might not have anything in common with individuals from the other teams – and yet you need to rely on one another in order to make things happen. Building trust both inside teams and across teams is critical to project's success. And I can tell you that building trust takes work and time. You need to be willing to trust others, to look past their differences, and also to prove to them that you yourself are a reliable person.

We live in a competitive society where we are taught since childhood that we are in competition with everybody else. Another obstacle to cross-team coordination is reluctance to sharing ideas, results, and even success. Teams can often be competitive with their experience and knowledge and are unwilling to share expertise with outside groups.

Different business cultures play a big role in why teams may be reluctant to collaborate or coordinate. Whether it is a team half way across the world or half way across town, different teams have different working styles. As a project leader, it is important to understanding that and work to bridge those differences.

As someone responsible for the overall success of their project or program, project leaders need to find solutions to establish coordination across teams, departments, and organizations, and tamper down resistance or anti-collaborative behavior. They need to make sure the groups are aligned to the same goals. The mis-alignment can be a big risk to a project's success if teams do not play well together. And this was exactly the position that I was in.

CASE STUDY: COLLABORATION CHALLENGES

After a year into the IT program at the large hospital system, the most notable organizational dysfunction was the absence of shared vision and goals across all departments. The product development team that was eager to see our software deployed and in use by the radiologists. The operational team, on the other hand, was not as enthusiastic and saw great risk in replacing the legacy IT systems with the new clinical systems.

Different Working Cultures

One of the primary challenges we faced, was that the two departments had radically different culture and business drivers. The product development team was: agile, design-focused, willing to entertain new ideas and take risk, willing to prototype and test concepts with users. The product development team worked closely with the primary users of the system (the radiologists), spent more time planning and thinking strategically, but were in general were relatively new to the radiology IT domain.

In contrast, most of the staff working on the operations team had come up through the ranks as radiological technologists or clinical supervisors. They had deep knowledge of the clinical domain and had been supporting the existing IT systems for over a decade. They excelled at putting out fires and trouble-shooting issue. However, they were risk averse. Any outside individual would need to prove their value, and gain their trust, before they would show acceptance to working together.

Poor Hand-offs Between Teams

Hand-offs between the product development and operations teams were not formalized, nor were there shared tool sets to allow closer coordination. Early in the program, hand-offs between teams were not handled very well. Code drops were often made with minimal forewarning and the functional documentation was lacking. As the product development team started to work more closely with the operations team, we stood up regular calls to review development timelines, milestones and hand off dates. The information was primary contained in spreadsheets and emails and not easily accessible or searchable.

Two years into the program the teams began using a cloud-based collaborative development environment (CDE) to track defects and enhancement requests across the various applications. The CDE became the key tool to bridge the gap between the product development and operations teams.

Low Organizational Trust

To make matters worse, there was low trust between the teams. The root of this distrust stemmed from reorganizations a few years back that decimated the operational team's ranks and forced the retirement of their former director. The operational team faulted the product development organization for the down-sizing and was skeptical of any collaboration efforts. There was an undercurrent within the operational team that their positions were not secure.

To be successful, I needed to align the two organizations in both strategic planning and tactical execution.

So how did I overcome these challenges? The path was not easy, nor did relations between the teams change quickly. It took time, effort and planning. The solution to the organizational dysfunction (i.e. the icy relationships between the teams) was to borrow tips and tricks from organizational design and associated collaboration models.

ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN

Organizational design is defined as a field that studies "how to organize people and resources in order to collectively accomplish desired ends." (Greenwood and Miller,

2010) When organizational design is applied to the business environment, it should originate from an organization's strategy. The design needs to factor in the existing workflows and processes used by the business unit or teams. In many ways, organizational design is like a blue print that an architect drafts <u>before</u> constructing a building.

While studying organizational design, I came across the concepts of *grouping* and *linking*. These concepts are the two primary building blocks that organizational designers have at their disposal. (Oliver Wyman, 1998)

Grouping is how individuals, functions, or activities are differentiated and aggregated. Businesses organized by function, such as Sales, Product Management, Engineering, Finance, etc. are good examples of organizational groupings. Effective grouping optimizes information sharing within the group, but often creates barriers with other groups. This is what happened at my organization between the software development and operational business units.

Linking is an integration mechanism used to coordinate and share information across groups. Organizational linking enables leadership to provide guidance and direction across the organization and eliminates some of the silos that can exist across teams. While most companies use a combination of both grouping patterns, *linking* is often an afterthought and not given the same attention as *grouping*.

There are four types of linking mechanisms to consider (Oliver Wyman, 1998):

1) *Liaison roles.* These involve coordination by trusted and respected individuals between teams. This is fairly common with a manager above two or more business units coordinating their activities.
2) *Cross-unit groups.* These are standing or ad hoc committees focusing on a specific process, product, or customer. (See Figure 2 for representation of a cross-unit group at the hospital.)
3) *Integrator roles.* These are managers, not directly supervising, but ensuring that processes are executed smoothly across groups.
4) *"Dotted lines"* These are mechanism which linking individuals within functions who are distributed across the organization. This is similar to informal communities of interest within an organization.

It would be increased organizational *linking* that proved to be effective at increasing alignment and coordination across disparate teams at my current organization.
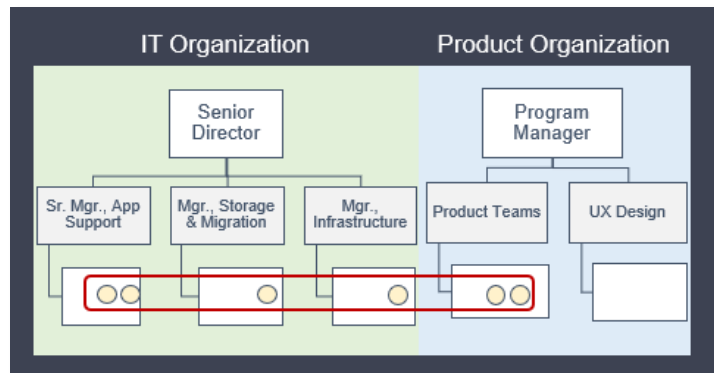
Figure 2. Cross-unit Group Example of Organizational Linking.

According to The Bridgespan Group, organizations tend to spend the majority of their energy on grouping activities, but very little on linking. Most individuals assume incorrectly that the organizational problems are caused by having the wrong groupings, when in fact, it is poor coordination and minimal organizational *linking* that are the primary structural problem facing organizations. (Bridgespan Group, 2008)

As project leaders, we need to be proactive in building structural linking mechanisms across the teams we work with and manage. Organizational *linking* should be one of the tools in the toolbox for every project manager leading teams across organizational units. Collaboration is hard, and it is not something that comes easy to everyone.

THESIS

Let us return to the situation at my organization, where there were two departments that really were not working well together, nor were they aligned on the same goals. The existing challenges (different working cultures, poor hand-offs, low collaboration and low organizational trust, etc.) had to be addressed in order to get the deployment program back on plan.

I had a working thesis that by applying some concepts from organizational design, we would be able to increase collaboration, and improve staff satisfaction and attitudes across the teams.

1. First, increased collaboration and organizational *linking* would bring about greater alignment and more efficient execution of project activities.
2. Second, we would address cultural differences by promoting a "One Team" mindset across the teams. (Winter, 2008)

What We Did: Implemented Linking

We spent time to plan and implement increased *linking* mechanisms between organizations. The first action was to adjust my focus to be an "integrator role" and to cover both product development and deployment activities. I embedded myself into the other team's activities and was physically collocated with them for multiple months.

We also encouraged cross-unit groupings that focused on particular processes or gaps that we wanted to be addressed. It turned out that some of the expertise resided in development team and some in the operations team. By working together collaboratively, the teams were more efficient at planning, solving problems and handling change management with the user base. In the end, these steps helped to solidify a sense of shared vision and goals across the teams.

In summary, we spent time building effective relationships across the two teams.

What We Did: One Team Mindset

A key tool to address the cultural differences across the teams was to promote what we called a "One Team" mindset. Our approach borrowed heavily from Australian leadership consultant Graham Winter who has been promoting the practice of "Think One Team" since the late 2000s.

What does a "One Team" mindset mean? (See Figure 3 below for a summary.) The approach breaks down as follows: (Winter, 2008)

- *Share the Big Picture* – Everyone across the teams knows and plays their part in a bigger picture. Everyone shares commitment to the big picture and does not pursue separate agendas.
- *Share the reality* – Everyone is open and honest about performance, so the teams can learn and grow from mistakes or wrong turns. The teams should bring conflict to the surface to be addressed.
- *Share the knowledge* – Take each other's ideas, expertise, and energy and put to use for the common goal and vision. Respect each other's contributions and different working styles.
- *Share the load* – Everyone should tackle the big issues as one unified team. The teams need to share the challenges, as well as the accountability.
- *Share the Wins and Losses* – The teams would all win, lose, and learn together. As leaders we needed to guide how the teams deal with losses and to channel that into something more positive and productive.

Managers from both the product development and operations teams included the "One Team Mindset" as part of the performance goals to ensure the collaborative

behaviors were reinforced. By promoting a "One Team" mindset, the teams naturally dropped collaboration and cultural barriers and over time grew closer together.

Figure 3. Summary of the "One Team" Mindset.

LESSONS LEARNED

While addressing the collaboration challenge at my organization, I gained several insights that are useful for other project leaders facing similar issues within their organizations.

1. Taking on the integrator role and embedding myself within the other team helped to build trust and break down walls. I learned a lot from the operations team and gained a greater appreciation of their expertise by working with them on a daily basis. Where my team excelled in planning and coordination, the operations team was great at detective work and problem solving. Their learning process, while seemingly slower, ensured collectively that all team members understood the technical matter and solutions that they identified.

2. The increased *linking* across the teams helped to tremendously improve hand offs, overall communications, and execution of project work. An early win included individuals on my team being seen as experts by the others on the operational team. By achieving that level of trust, they were pulled into deeper collaboration with the operations team.

3. Both teams wanted to do well and succeed at their jobs. Everyone wanted to do their best for our users, and ultimately for the patients and patients' care at out hospitals. This core desire naturally helped pull the teams together despite their differences.

4. Lastly, the progression toward increased collaboration was not linear. There were setbacks and emotional blowups that happened from time-to-time. After these occurrences, the leadership for both teams investigated why and took lessons from them.

RESULTS

This case study began with two teams that had organizational walls separating them (both mentally and physically), low trust and collaboration, and reluctance of one organization to support higher level goals. After we implemented the organizational linking mechanisms and promoted a "One Team" mindset across the teams, we began to see positive results from the changes:

The teams gained a sense of shared vision and goals across the business. Staff from both business units could be heard saying: "We are in this together!" or "We are One Team!" and they meant it. There was increased collaboration and alignment across the organizations, as well as higher levels of trust, better handoffs, and improved division of labor on the deployment program. We had multiple linkages at various levels between the two organizations to reinforce the collaboration and teamwork.

In the end, the program accomplished both its product development goals, as well as its system deployment goals. Yes, this story has a happy ending!

RECOMMENDATIONS

Now that you have heard my story, here are some recommendations for other project leaders:

1. Become better educated on organizational design so that you can use the knowledge on your projects and programs. Organizational dysfunction is not going away.
2. Take time at the beginning of a project to think about the organization structure and what mechanisms are needed
3. Be proactive and deliberate about building relationship and bonds between teams. It takes time to build up social capital needed for effective collaboration.
4. Try holding a "Session Zero" with teams to communicate clear roles and responsibilities prior to getting too far into program execution.
5. Be willing to go the extra mile to break down silos. Take on an integrator role, become a diplomat, collocate, or even roll out a "One Team" mindset with your teams.
6. Be willing to help the other teams when they are "in a pinch". This is a certain way to help bridge organizational divides and build social capital.

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Bruce W. Gay, PMP, has over 20 years of experience managing programs and customer relationships across healthcare Information Technology, telecommunications, and defense industries. Currently a Senior Program Manager at UPMC Enterprises (the commercialization arm of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center), Bruce manages a multi-million dollar program to develop the next generation of Radiology Informatics systems. Over the past 13 years, he has managed creative teams that incorporated UX Design & Design Thinking methodologies into their product development processes.

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