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KELSEY ORION DEGREEF, MA
Indiana University

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Silo Busting: Common Sense

KELSEY ORION DEGREEF, MA
Indiana University

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Abstract The classification systems that we use to organize museums have created collaboration-stifling silos between, and even within departments. Because of their ability to impede strategy and innovation museum-wide, there is an overwhelming need to dissolve them. However, little effort has been made to accumulate the wealth of corrective resources available to tackle museum silos in a succinct and applicable way. Uniting research from the fields of Anthropology, Biology, and Business Psychology, this article outlines adaptable, common sense, principles specific to museums that will help to identify and prevent future silos. The organizational predisposition of many museums is a product of defunct environmental markers and, therefore, should be reconditioned to support collaboration between and within institutions.

About the Author Kelsey Orion DeGreef graduated from the Master of Arts in Arts Administration program at Indiana University's School of Public and Environmental Affairs. Research interests include organizational behavior, collaboration, philosophy of art, and non-profit management. Kelsey can be contacted at: kelseyodegreef@gmail.com.

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Introduction

It is no surprise that our interconnected, 21st-century society is plagued by a well-known paradox. Forces of globalization and technological change allow information to fly across the planet at lightning speed – we are able to be more connected than ever before – yet our lives remain fragmented (Tett 2015). Fragments, or silos, as they are most commonly referred to, have become one of the hottest business management topics. Whether you are already committed to finding a solution for your museum or have yet to realize their pervasive scope, know that the way your organization chooses to respond to them will have an everlasting effect.

To be clear, this article is not anti-silo, because they are not *always* bad. We need them to survive in such a multifaceted world. Silos can create a sense of structure capable of supporting radical complexity. But they can also create chaos. Isolated teams of experts that fail to communicate with each other can stifle innovation by creating pockets of information and restricting perspective. Further, siloed thinking can make it easier to overlook dangerous risks, and in some extreme cases can be responsible for business failure.

If museum staff expand their awareness of silos, they could start to bust through their own organizational silos and prevent further constriction of mission-critical initiatives. The case studies available on this topic largely come from outside the arts and cultural nonprofit sector

and can seem unapproachable or not applicable to museums. However, once translated, the successes and failures of those from outside the sector expose new strategies that can be adapted to meet the business needs of any museum.

This article's multidisciplinary approach seeks to empower museum staff, no matter their position or rank, to imagine the possibilities of a new organizational structure and accept the invitation to make space and observe. Can you identify silos within your museum? Are you doing something about it? When is the last time your museum reviewed its internal structure to improve cross-departmental collaboration or the patron experience? The first section of this article reviews the disruptive characteristics of silos as they relate to museums. The second section explains the research methodology, and the remaining section outlines three silo-busting strategies for museums of all sizes, thinking more like an anthropologist, unifying data and being open to collaboration.

Silo Setbacks

One of their most defining features is the fact that silos do not discriminate. They can come about in Fortune 500 companies and start-ups that employ less than 20 people. The common thread in each instance is that they make it difficult for organizations to be agile in such a fluid marketplace. Further still, a siloed organizational structure can destroy trust, cut off communication, and foster complacency (Kotter 2011). Yet we consistently see that organizations around the globe are divided and then subdivided into a myriad of teams – teams that often fail to talk to each other, let alone collaborate.

Some common signs that you are working within or among silos are as follows: you have been the lead on a project that is crucial to your department, but others do not understand why it is so important; you hardly communicate, let alone socialize with colleagues from other departments; or you feel out of touch when you learn about a project that another department is taking the lead on. For example, departments within a museum seldom take the quantity, frequency, or content of their communications compared to other departments into consideration before connecting, leaving the patron confused and annoyed by an overwhelming number of donation asks, calls to action, and pleas for participation. It might explain how pervasive silos are to consider the fact that they do not only refer to physical structures or organizations, such as departments, but can also exist in the mind and within social groups (Tett 2015).

Research Method

This article leverages three recently published works from wildly different disciplines to better understand how museum staff can work towards breaking down the silos that are stifling progress within their organizations. The published works include three books with collaboration central to their theme. *The Silo Effect* written by award-winning Financial Times journalist Gillian Tett who, through an anthropologist's lens, explains why so many organizations still fail to communicate; *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature* written by the Co-Founder of Biomimicry Institute, Janine M. Benyus, who explains that observing the natural world and more importantly learning from it can help to solve some of this century's toughest problems; and *Collaborative Intelligence: Thinking with People Who Think Differently*

by Dawna Markova, Ph.D. and Angie McArthur, who claim that our ability to think with others on behalf of what matters to everyone is emerging as a new form of professional currency.

These books were selected because of their differences. One learns the most about one's passions when stepping away from them, creating space for another perspective to shape understanding. Further, each of these books was written in the last twenty years – in an era that is crucial to the shift that has been taking place in the way that humankind thinks, interacts, and innovates. Each of the books are written by respected experts in their fields and contain numerous genre specific examples of the power of collaboration. Silos must be broken down – for there is much more to be gained for all involved by dissolving barriers than there is in creating them.

Culture Matters

In her latest book, *The Silo Effect*, Gillian Tett offers up an interesting thought experiment. What if we acted more like anthropologists? She claims that adopting the following anthropological principles could help reverse the challenges that silos present and perhaps even prevent them from forming in the first place:

- Take a bottom-up worldview. By flipping the script, and dedicating yourself to understanding micro-level patterns, you will end up with a more comprehensive understanding of the big picture.
- Stay open-minded. Looking and more importantly listening with an open mind will allow you to see how all the seemingly unrelated pieces connect.
- Leave no details behind. In trying to look at the totality of what you see, you will end up examining the facts that other people do not want to talk about.
- Mind the gap between rhetoric and reality. Listen carefully to what people say and compare it to what they *actually* do.
- Compare differences often. Bringing together seemingly different systems can help illuminate the underlying patterns of different groups and can be invaluable to understanding your own.
- Celebrate diversity. Try to appreciate that there is more than one valid way to reach a goal.

Understanding that silos are a cultural phenomenon which arise out of the systems we use to classify and organize the world; Tett emphasizes the importance of studying this cultural aspect of our organizations. The most striking thought she has to offer is that the classification systems we use to organize our worlds, minds, and presumably organizations, are usually a function of nurture, not nature, and therefore are not inevitable.

A Common Language All Can Understand

Odds are your data are as siloed as your museum. It is hardly a surprise that departments using different databases would want to hoard their data to protect it from other departments. As is often the case, development departments may limit access to outsiders in an effort to protect their data from corruption. Perhaps your department is doing something similar -

closing a door instead of opening one. This produces an “us” and “them” dichotomy - which disrupts the flow of ideas and knowledge sharing. One of the most striking examples often heard in the museum world is a curator talking about “my collection.”

Janine M. Benyus describes this issue in her book *Biomimicry*. She says that as a species (department) we cannot occupy a niche that appropriates all resources, there must be some sharing. Any species (department) that ignores this, winds up destroying its community to support its own growth. Benyus uses words like species and community because her field of expertise is biological sciences, but there are valuable lessons to be learned from her research and as she so eloquently puts it, “a system far from stable is nothing more than a system ripe for change.”

Unifying the data collected by your museum creates a common language that each department can understand. For example, development, marketing, and education all communicate, steward, and interact with the same patrons. If they are limited to pulling from their own separate databases how can they know what information they are missing? Previously isolated data, when combined with other data, can be powerful and can reveal surprising patterns that benefit all involved. Small steps can be made towards unifying different information sources and will slowly reveal the strength of your data. Know that the changes you make now, no matter how incremental, are the foundation for the future.

Open Your Door

It has become obvious that innovative thinking and collaboration are required to stay competitive in today’s world, and that silos prevent both. In their book *Collaborative Intelligence*, Markova and McArthur maintain that many of the barriers keeping us apart are optional. They argue that when required, the barriers between us dissolve so that we can draw on the innate hardwiring within us to connect. Maybe you have thought about reaching out to collaborate with another department, but it was not *absolutely* required. They go on to explain that too many of us turn away from using our influence to create change because we just do not know how to bridge the differences between us.

But how many unbridgeable differences can you really have within one institution - especially if you and your colleagues are all guided by the same mission? There are, no doubt, logistical issues; but with the plethora of cloud-based internet tools available to us, that excuse is hardly relevant. What it really takes is a desire for change. Moreover, what works for one museum may not be the right solution for another. Perhaps you blur the lines between departments by creating temporary and flexible apprenticeship-like roles like at Facebook (Tett 2015.) Or maybe you hold monthly tech-free management meetings that invite everyone to unplug and share upcoming opportunities and reflect upon past challenges. The bottom line is that the structure of your museum should not define or restrict its strategy.

Rethinking Organizational Silos

There is not a one-size fits all solution for silos. They are dynamic and can form within departments, between departments, and beyond. Silos tend to create pods of people who think alike and who get their power from association with their specialized knowledge

resulting in a lack of concern for the “big picture” and a greater risk of stagnation (Bianca 2007). We are used to seeing that we expect to see, hearing what we expect to hear, and doing what we expect to do. These habits make us numb and limit our potential. They offer comfort without challenge, reassurance without insight, and certainty without imagination (Markova and McArthur 2015).

This article demonstrates that there are actionable strategies available to overcome the challenges that silos create and to prevent them from forming in the future:

- Thinking more like an anthropologist helps you to understand the way your world is classified and that it is changeable.
- Unifying your data brings outsiders in and opens the channels of communication.
- Being open to collaboration creates trust and forms dependable connections between departments that help to ensure efficiency and increase awareness.

Can these strategies be applied to the museum sector as a whole? Are museums themselves silos within the larger arts and cultural nonprofit landscape? Ultimately, all nonprofits have the same goal: to improve the quality of life for their community.

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