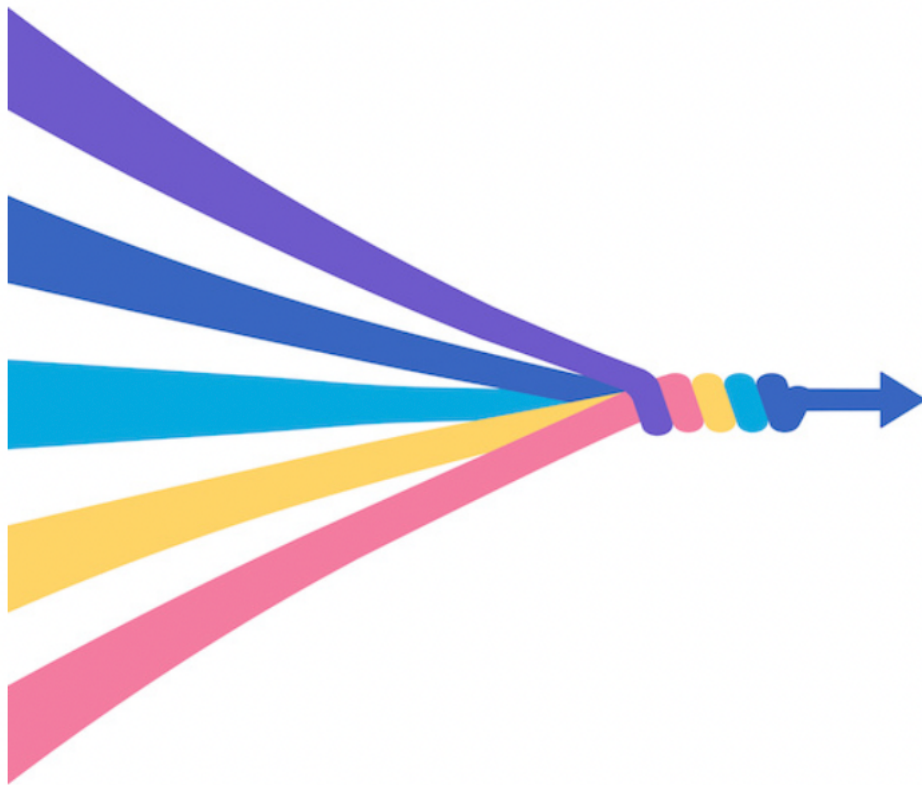


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Is your leadership development breaking or making silos?



There is no person better positioned to prepare an organization for crisis and create a culture of collaboration and silo-busting than the chief learning officer.

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Well-intentioned leadership development may be reinforcing the very organizational silos it intends to break down.

For more than twenty years, I've had countless meetings with chief learning officers and directors of leadership development as they've researched, explored and crafted their leadership development strategy.

During this process, I hear similar themes emerge time and time again: "Drive business results, create a healthy leadership pipeline, retain and engage our best people, live our values," and the list goes on. One of the most common objectives is, "we need to break down silos." This is also articulated as, "we want to get everyone on the same page," or "we want to build a common language of leadership."

The onslaught of COVID-19 only caused the silo effect to multiply. With nearly everyone working from home in isolation, offices, conference rooms and training facilities, such as GE's Crotonville or KPMG's new Lakehouse, turned into ghost towns. But CLOs successfully reinvented and reframed leadership development for the virtual setting despite the scramble early on to adapt with technology and provide timely leadership tools, learning and experiences for organizational survival.

At its best, well-executed virtual development was like an emotional life raft providing social interaction and connection with others. Content shifts to areas such as emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience and wellbeing helped leaders to be there for their people.

There is no person better positioned to prepare an organization for crisis or create a culture of collaboration and silo-busting than the CLO. It's their job to shape, inform and create the leadership and learning approach that reinforces the business strategy. Trawl the research studies from Deloitte, Brandon Hall, Gallup, McKinsey and so on, and you will quickly see that there is plenty of opportunities for improvement in leadership development and, in particular, breaking down silos.

The unavoidable truth is that the report card for leadership development – as a whole – is not good. According to Brandon Hall Group’s HCM Outlook 2021 Study, only 34 percent of organizations said they can prove that their leadership program significantly impacts their business results. The rest are struggling to develop leaders so they can help their organizations meet their business goals. Why are two-thirds of leadership development initiatives failing so abjectly?

In many cases, there is a disconnected and incoherent collection of multiple models, vendors, approaches for different levels, departments, regions and divisions across an organization. Atlanta-based leadership development practitioner Dan Stotz calls this the “Jigsaw Jumble.” Siloed and disparate development options beget siloed and divided organizations. The solution can only come from what recently retired leadership expert and author Ron Crossland calls a systemwide approach to leadership development that requires:

- A common philosophy and framework for how leaders think and act.
- A progressive and iterative approach from level to level and across the enterprise.
- Carefully curated content and experiences that compliment versus compete.

A well-thought-out strategy based on consistency and simplicity will beat the complexity of the Jigsaw Jumble any day.

So, what do real-world silo-busting strategies look like? Here are several true, unsanitized silo-busting stories from the field of leadership development that illustrate how some organizations have addressed this challenge.

A medical group's plan to address disruption

When a medical group with a workforce of over 700 in the Pacific Northwest launched their leadership development initiative two years ago, they were not thinking about a global pandemic.

The CEO launched the initiative to deal with a different kind of disruption: A major IT system implementation that would impact the entire organization. In preparation for the inevitable stress, they embarked on a comprehensive leadership development initiative that brought all departments together to home in on their leadership skills to effectively absorb this disruptive change. Cross-functional workshops built leadership muscle across interdependent departments and functions. As a consequence, it resulted in a much faster and smoother outcome as hearts, minds and heads were fully committed in advance.

When the pandemic hit them in March 2020, the proving ground from the technology implementation and their leadership training effectively prepared this organization to do battle with COVID-19. Deeper trust and better relationships between previously siloed departments were erased. Hindsight is 20-20, but the CEO wholly attributes the collaborative leadership development effort and the challenge of the IT implementation as the best preparation for the COVID-19 onslaught. At risk of sounding too simple, the five P's (prior preparation prevents poor performance) held true in this scenario, but there was a critical sixth P that made a big difference, and that was the real-life **proving ground** provided by the implementation.

Silo-busting lesson: Develop the skills and relationships across departments and functions in preparation for inevitable challenges that will come.

Closing the gap between leaders and individual contributors at a major retailer

The pandemic caused major shifts in the retail industry, and many retailers suffered as a result. With stores in high streets and malls around the world,

this particular global retailer was more visible than most. A combination of COVID-19 and the social and racial unrest caused many stores in major U.S. cities to not just close, but board up their windows as well. With stores shuttered, and layoffs and furloughs spiking, confusion and stress were at an all-time high. Additionally, everyone was isolated – confined to the silo of working from home.

But in the darkest of times, a silver lining solution can emerge. In this case, it was the use of virtual leadership development that held everything together and immediately provided useful resources to managers to do their job during a pandemic. While serving the traditional base of managers and leaders, it became apparent that this strategy could be a formula for division. Everyone needed help, tools and connection at the same time, not just leaders.

Listening carefully to the employee base it became clear that the same programming for leaders could be repurposed quickly to serve the organization's individual contributor population. As a matter of fact, this was the population that needed help and connection most. As a solution, virtual programming underpinned by the organizational values was rapidly re-jigged and deployed and is currently being delivered at-scale to the individual contributor population. The organization has effectively redirected its development efforts to where it is most needed: providing the tools and inspiration to all based on the common language of their values.

Where efforts should be directed to bridge this divide between leaders and individual contributors is backed up by a recent [Work Trend Index Survey](#). The survey says 61 percent of leaders are "thriving," but only 38 percent of those "without decision-making authority" reported feeling the same way. Employees are struggling and a strategy where only leaders get the good stuff is going to create division. Remember, we're all in this together.

Silo-busting lesson: Seek creative ways to inspire and provide great leadership development across the organization – not just for the top-level leaders. Organizational values are guideposts for everyone and provide a great framework to build collaboration up and down the organization.

Breaking regional silos in a consumer food service retailer

In pre-pandemic times, this multinational consumer food service retailer had one overriding objective – to open more stores faster. A key challenge for them, however, was employee retention. This varied greatly by region with stars and laggards. They operated in their own silos and there was no real mechanism whereby struggling regions could learn from their star neighbors.

Corporate headquarters offered various programs from well-known leadership development vendors. They were all fine and good in their own right, but the problem was that there were all these different models, vendors and approaches, which in and of themselves became competitive and siloed. One leadership guru's philosophy would be pitted against another, and did little to address the very silo they had intended to deconstruct. Additionally, none of them adequately reflected the personality, passion or brand of this organization. Their brand was their greatest asset, yet in every instance the commercially branded materials of each vendor took precedence.

Asking the question, "what does a leader really look like in our organization?" was key to creating a pivotal shift in strategy and approach. It resulted in stripping out the complexity and the creation of a program about being an authentic leader within the organization. The program leveraged their greatest asset – the brand. It underpinned their values, baked into the chairman and CEO's shared vision and looked like and felt like their own. The authentic leader program was organized and delivered on bringing the regions together to learn, grow and build a common language for leadership and work on retention strategy. Workshops opened with a senior leader setting the context for collaboration between regions, articulating the growth vision and positioning leadership and building better bosses as being critical to retention.

Silo-busting lesson: Leverage learning between regions. Create a single unique and unifying approach to developing leaders. Cut complexity and confusion with too many programs that may compete with each other. Make the program yours, based on your values and your business strategy.

Silo-busting feedback for the CEO at a regional medical center

Before our workshop world was transfigured to virtual, any facilitator would have told you “the magic happens in the room.” Putting everyone in the same room was just the start for a regional medical center embarking on leadership development to improve interdepartmental collaboration and patient care. Leaders representing medical, patient billing, IT, HR, nurse management and pharmacy came together for a leadership workshop focused on building trust and collaboration.

The CEO was in attendance and so was the facilities director, a crusty old soul who had never been to a leadership workshop before. During group discussion and sharing feedback, the unfiltered and very direct facilities director addressed the CEO in front of the entire class. This was his lightning bolt moment: “We never see you!” he said. “You lead from behind a closed door!”

This one piece of behavioral feedback changed everything. It was what everyone was thinking but did not have the courage to say. Fortunately, the CEO maintained his composure and his emotions well, and said thank you for the feedback. What could have been a bombshell moment turned out to be the single most powerful silo-buster for this medical system. The CEO heard loud and clear that he needed to increase his accessibility, listen and actively build connections between departments.

Checking in with the vice president of HR a week after the workshop, she said, “He is a changed man. A total transformation! Every day, he is walking the corridors, conversing, listening and building bridges between clinical staff and administrative staff.”

Silo-busting lesson: Create a development environment where people feel safe to speak the truth about barriers and blockers to collaboration. Solicit CEO and C-suite-level support and ensure they model collaboration.

Simplification and optimization at two *Fortune* 100 organizations

Two behemoths in the business world, both known and admired for their leadership development, undertook large-scale audits of their corporate learning strategies. One organization called it the “Simplification Project,” the other called it the “Vendor Optimization Project.” Both represented a radical culling of programs and leadership development. It was a cold-light-of-day assessment into what was really serving their respective organizations.

The audit findings were shocking. In one organization’s case, they discovered they had over 1,100 classes, 50-plus coaching courses, 110-plus communications courses, five vendors managing their LMS and 300-plus single-time-use vendors. This triggered a dramatic effort to refocus the learning strategy, culling the vast number of programs and vendors and reducing the silo side-effect that too many options creates.

As you can imagine, the economic cost savings were huge. Additionally, the dynamic and relationship of surviving vendors shifted. Relationships became more integrated – they became closer to their customers and made the ultimate shift from vendors to select trusted partners. Another silo was bust!

Silo-busting lesson: Take stock and audit your range of Leadership Development offerings. Cull and curate globally relevant learning experiences that inspire and grow leaders. Simplify and optimize!

To conclude

You know the saying, “a crisis is a terrible opportunity to waste?” CLOs and learning leaders are uniquely positioned to make a big difference on how our world evolves and our ability to navigate polarization, silos, disruption, and lack of control through learning and development, especially leadership development. The first step is to focus on what we can control.

CLOs call the shots on how leadership development is served across functions, levels, regions and departments plus the choices we make on

vendors, models, and approaches. They can ensure it is set up structurally to succeed in breaking silos.

Learning content choice is the other area of control. Making informed choices will allow you to find the right content to nourish an organization-wide mindset for collaboration and connection. Are you giving your organization the learning content it needs to innovate out of the current crisis?

All of us in leadership development have a profound responsibility to work our strategy smarts to serve up silo-busting solutions and provide the leadership and interpersonal skills for a healthy and dynamic organizational culture.