



Breaking down silos

Rosaria (Ria) Hawkins, Ph.D.

Valerie Ryder, MLS, MIVM

April 2013

CC image courtesy of dsearls on Flickr



Breaking down silos

“There are no constraints on the human mind, no walls around the human spirit, no barriers to our progress except those we erect ourselves.” - Ronald Reagan

Rosaria (Ria) Hawkins, Ph.D., President of Take Charge Consultants

Valerie Ryder, MLS, MIBM, Director of Information Strategy for Wolper Information Services

Part 1:

Strategies for addressing cultural barriers to change

Our world is full of barriers and divisions. We live in cities that are broken down into neighborhoods, and neighborhoods into streets. We work in organizations that consist of departments, divisions, branches, units and teams. Our very bodies consist of systems each with different functions and parts. In order to organize and optimize, nature (including humans) tends to separate, segregate and appropriate. The result: “Silos” combined with a natural human tendency to stick with one’s own (to remain part of one’s group, to cling together like the last few Cheerios in a bowl).

The term silo literally means *storage tower* – a tall, cylindrical building that separates and stores material on a farm. We, as a nation, have progressed beyond the agricultural age. Twenty-first century firms cannot succeed if they separate and store knowledge, skills, resources and abilities. This is common sense, even common knowledge. However, once formed, silos are difficult to disassemble for many reasons.

One factor behind silos’ impenetrable nature is related to human nature. Our value and worth at work are determined by the amount of knowledge we have acquired. Therefore, people tend to hold close and guard their special expertise. Another aspect of human behavior is to trust those whose goals/skill sets/special expertise are similar to ours rather than those who are “different.” So, collaborating and sharing ideas are often practices that inherently run counter to our nature. In addition to our basic human inclinations, nature provides a great example of why culture change is so difficult. Breaking down nature’s barriers involves piercing the membrane of another system. In science and in organizations, this is a risky act. The piercer, a foreign body, can bring harm to the organism it invades. The intrusion can trigger an attack. And, both organisms run the risk of losing their identities or even dying once their membrane is punctured. It’s not a whole lot different in the world of work. Effecting positive change requires significant work and courage. Still, breaking down silos is an important act, and there are strategies that one can use to improve outcomes. These are potentially quite important for information professionals, who can be uniquely positioned to help the process, given their fundamental focus on the discovery, organizing and sharing of both internal and external information resources. (See a previous post on this topic, [“Change: What is means for academic librarians.”](#))

Following are some tips for “piercing” silo walls without triggering loss of identity or organization-wide resistance.

First, it’s important to recognize that culture change can be a long process. An organization’s culture is complex, built over time, and an incredibly strong (and often unrecognized) determinant of behavior. Culture is difficult to surface (because it’s so accepted, for so long, and often without question). By understanding what makes or defines a culture, you can make the unknown explicit and tap into a number of different leverage points in order to promote understanding, action and change. Three of the more common definitions of culture are explained below:

- **The way it is:** Communicated through stories, ritual and symbols
- **Who has power and how things are done:** Communicated by leaders, formal and informal (Power is generally held by different individuals and units within the whole)
- **Who we are:** Communicated through purpose and values

Understand the “way it is.” Engage others in a naïve (innocent, unbiased) look at what’s communicated to people about the way things are. What common stories are told and retold? What are newcomers to the organization told about what to do and not to do (both formally and informally)? If you had to write the 10 commandments that are at play in your organization (but not explicitly shared), what would they be? What gets ceremonialized? Celebrated? Buried? What does the organization look like? What’s the layout, the office set-up? What’s posted on walls? What other symbols are visible and what do they communicate about what’s important? A candid discussion of these factors helps make culture explicit by surfacing meaning behind various subtle messages as to what’s important.

Understand who is in charge and where the boundaries are: Given the “way it is,” who serves to keep things in check? How do they do it? What rewards and consequences are utilized? What are the divides that hinder more effective work, the creation of more value for customers? What are the passions of the people who come to provide their labor and toil each day? An exploration of these questions helps describe who and how things are controlled.

Consider who you are and who you want to be: Discussion of the items above can provide an impetus for change—allowing you to build on the desirable aspects of the culture and to work to change those aspects that are less so. However, if the conversation is not packaged and presented well, the messenger can become trapped in a death-defining act or a career-limiting move. Standing outside the culture and holding a mirror up to the ugly stepsister has significant risk. Telling the emperor his heiny is exposed, and has been for years, is not an easy message to deliver.

Some tips for doing it well: *DxVxFS > R*

That’s a common change formula (created by Richard Beckhard and David Gleicher, refined by Kathie Dannemiller, and used by consultants for decades). In order to overcome the natural resistance to change (R), you must create dissatisfaction (D) with the current state, a vision (V) of something better and some first steps (FS).

- **Create dissatisfaction with the current state:** Engage leaders (both formal and informal). Talk to people about your insights and your desire to make a difference. Ask

them what they see. Be patient, be methodical, and be tenacious. Getting people to see the culturally obvious is a huge challenge. Be respectful and be cautious of any intent to “force” people to see it your way. Communication itself is a potent transformational act; enabling someone to see something different, i.e. to change his or her point of view, is the first step in the change process.

- **Help others see a different future** (this is the vision piece) by asking “In what ways, do you think things could be different?” Continued conversation about what a different future looks like encourages sense-making. The more another person talks about what things might be like, the more he/she considers what steps might be necessary to make that change happen (i.e., the more he/she considers options and possibilities).
- **Create first steps by asking “What do you think we need to do** to start to engage others in the creation of a different workplace?” The design of first steps (even if small) is huge when it comes to cultural change. It implies that the other is ready to take action and to stand against potentially powerful obstructionist forces from the organization itself, structural, political, etc.
- **Take baby steps.** Change is not born in the creation of grand designs but instead is created by micro acts taken by everyday people. This is Malcolm Gladwell’s fundamental concept in The Tipping Point. Real change occurs and is set in motion not by the completion of a certain number of steps spelled out in a change plan, but by the small actions of many as they take hold of a new concept (future) and work to make it a reality. That future is unlocked in micro conversations—small concepts idealized by small groups and put into action. You can encourage localized, emergent action by keeping ongoing discussions on the agenda:
 - What are we doing to promote the kind of culture and silo-free environment we desire?
 - What’s working?
 - Not working?
 - What do we need to focus on moving forward?

These steps provide a template for piercing the membrane of organizational silos using non-invasive dialog rather than a scalpel or ax to break down barriers. Such an approach improves your chances of achieving the desired outcomes of shared purpose, greater flexibility, accountability and productivity.

- RH



CC image courtesy of dsearls on Flickr

Part 2: Silo'd by nature

The term “silo” is perfect for visualizing what often happens in organizations – sometimes because of structural barriers (physical and virtual divides between departments, geographic locations, etc.) and sometimes because of more deliberate human maneuvering. It happens in all types and sizes of organizations, profit or non-profit, corporate or academic, private or public sector.

But the image of separate, tall, cylindrical containers conveys just how difficult information sharing and collaboration can be in such an organizational setting. It also draws a distinct contrast to all of the concepts of networks and connectedness that have become popular thanks to technological advances and management best practices.

What this means for many of us in our daily work life is that breaking down silos is a prime challenge – especially for information professionals, whose charge and mission are inherently defined by discovering, sharing and unleashing the power of information.

Information professionals encounter these silos almost daily in the course of performing their jobs. While seeking answers to queries from internal customers, the information professional often winds up acting as a “switching point” or “matchmaker” to connect individuals within the same organization who – many times, unknowingly – are working on related projects.

Fortunately, today there are technology tools that help to bridge these gaps and eliminate silo walls. Certain knowledge management technologies and practices, such as collaborative workspaces, institutional repositories and [expertise directories](#) (a common KM tool similar to a company “yellow pages” that allows quick identification of what critical knowledge is where within the organization), can be deployed to facilitate cross-departmental or cross-silo communications and knowledge sharing. Savvy information professionals position themselves for career advancement by leveraging their skill sets to accomplish these things – towards the best, most productive use of institutional knowledge.

Many times, “softer” people skills are also required to manage silos, especially in dealing with those barriers that are actually inherent in the culture of an organization. Sometimes silo walls have been hardened over quite a bit of time, or are based on distrust, or rooted in competing goals, or are the result of unsuccessful mergers. Consider a corporation with an extensive R&D

investment, which might have researchers competing for funding. In fact, researchers in academia might feel similar competitive pressure. In either segment, budget compression can significantly inhibit the open exchange of information and knowledge. In the past, organizations have even had separate IT systems for different divisions, i.e. Corporate/G&A vs. various business units or administrative/accounting vs. individual schools within an academic institution. Fortunately, “enterprise-level” integration has begun to dismantle those barriers. But another potential factor is ingrained bias or allegiance, such as manufacturing vs. sales or faculty vs. librarians (in cases, sadly, where a librarian might have “lesser” status because the perception is that they do not teach entire courses, or librarians may not be granted tenure in that academic environment).

While silos are important for information professionals to consider within their own organizations (knowing who’s who, who’s doing what, and making sure they are clued in to organizational goals and priorities), it’s also important across the profession. Our world is very fragmented. We have certain associations and conferences focused on specific types of information professionals (academic librarians, corporate librarians, public librarians, etc.) and “never the twain shall meet.” Well, perhaps just not as often as we might make possible for the purpose of cross-pollinating ideas and sharing best practices in ways that could make us all better at what we do.

Interested in learning more about silos and how to break them down? Check out the very robust and diverse list of additional reading material that follows.

- VR

Pt. 3:

Breaking library silos to unleash the power of information



CC image courtesy of highersights on Flickr

Information professionals overcome the obstacles of information silos and organizational barriers in their workplace but sometimes we do not recognize silo mentality in our own profession. Too often we are deeply immersed in our specialized niche within the information profession and fail to notice the broader implications of trends in other types of libraries. We may even focus too narrowly on today’s customer requests for

information and be unaware of what is happening elsewhere in our own

organization that will have implications for the future of our library and our customers. Without realizing it, we are digging ourselves deeper into our own library silos and isolating ourselves from outside forces and factors that can help us, if we listen to their ideas, as often as they can harm us when ignored.

I've attended many library conferences, held by various library or other professional associations, over the years. The conferences and sessions that I enjoyed the most were those where there was a mixture of academic, corporate, government, and public librarians in attendance, who had open minds about collaborating and sharing knowledge based on a diversity of experience bases. It was amazing to follow the progression of trends from one library silo to another over the course of years. Academic libraries led the charge in migrating from print to electronic content, being trailblazers to solutions for incorporating electronic media into existing work processes and working with information industry players to develop better technology platforms to deploy information to their users. Corporate libraries hit the beachheads of measuring the value of information to their organizations and demonstrating the return on investment of libraries and information centers during the early waves of economic recession. Government libraries were early adopters of emerging and leading-edge information technologies to meet the research needs of their agencies. Public libraries have redefined their roles in their communities to meet the ever-changing demands of their patron demographics and funding sources. Savvy librarians watch the trends in other library sectors, learn from their successes and failures, and apply or adapt the best solutions to their library and organization.

Top techniques for breaking down silos within the information profession:

- Attend conferences, meetings, and webinars outside of your primary area of professional specialization. For even more eye-opening revelations, attend those which your major user groups attend.
- When attending a library conference, schedule a mix of sessions to include topics of interest to other library sectors. Find out what their burning issues are, and what solutions they are investigating or deploying.
- Lurk on discussion lists, social media gathering places or thought streams that are specific to other library silos.
- Include librarians and information professionals in your social media and face-to-face networks who work in other types of libraries, other organizational silos, other subject specialties. Make a practice of asking them for advice and perspectives on your projects. Reciprocate with your advice and insights when they solicit your input.
- Consider other solutions to your problems with an open mind. Challenge yourself first with the question – how could this work in my situation – rather than rejecting it outright with – my situation is totally different than theirs.

As we plan our annual objectives for 2013, select conferences to attend, and decide on professional development activities to expand our capabilities, what will you do differently this year to break down the barriers between library sectors and unleash the full power of the information professional by collaborating with colleagues outside of your specialty?

- VR

Additional reading:

"3dissue.com E-readers, are they green?" *3dissue.com*. October 2, 2012.
<http://www.3dissue.com/e-readers-are-they-green/> (accessed October 2012).

Barrett, Brenda. "Advantages and Disadvantages of Book on Demand Publishing." *Brighthub*. September 12, 2011. <http://www.brighthub.com/multimedia/publishing/articles/123228.aspx> (accessed January 2013).

Baumann, Michael. "Ebooks: A New School of Thought." *www.infotoday.com*. May 2010. (accessed February 2013).

Berners-Lee, Duncan Clark and Mike. "What's the carbon footprint of... the internet? - guardian.co.uk." *The Guardian*. August 12, 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2010/aug/12/carbon-footprint-internet> (accessed October 2012).

Berners-Lee, Mike. *How Bad Are Bananas?: The Carbon Footprint of Everything*. Profile Books, 2010.

Bowker. "Bowker - Self-Publishing Sees Triple-Digit Growth in Just Five Years." *www.bowker.com*. October 24, 2012. http://www.bowker.com/en-US/aboutus/press_room/2012/pr_10242012.shtml (accessed January 2013).

Clarke, Michael. "Professional and Scholarly Publishing Leads the Market for Ebooks by a Wide Margin - The Scholarly Kitchen." *The Scholarly Kitchen*. November 24, 2009. <http://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2009/11/24/professional-and-scholarly-publishing-leads-the-market-for-e-books-by-a-wide-margin/> (accessed December 2012).

Farrar, Lara. "Greening the Internet: How much CO2 does this article produce? - CNN.com." *CNN.com/technology*. July 13, 2009. <http://www.cnn.com/2009/TECH/science/07/10/green.internet.CO2/index.html> (accessed October 2012).

Genoways, Ted. "Genoways-Paperless." *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. Fall 0, 2010. <http://www.vqronline.org/articles/2010/fall/genoways-paperless/> (accessed October 24, 2012).

Glanz, James. "Power, Pollution and the Internet." *The New York Times*, September 22, 2012.

Glaser, Mark. "MediaShift - 5Across: Environmental Impact of Newspapers, Books, e-Waste - PBS." *pbs.org*. January 22, 2010. <http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2010/01/5across-environmental-impact-of-newspapers-books-e-waste022.html> (accessed October 2012).

Google. "Efficiency: How we do it - Google Data Centers." *google.com*. <http://www.google.com/about/datacenters/efficiency/internal/> (accessed October 2012).

Govindarajan, Vijay. "The First Two Steps Toward Breaking Down Silos in Your Organization." *HBR Blog Network*. 2011 йил 9-August. <http://blogs.hbr.org/govindarajan/2011/08/the-first-two-steps-toward-breaking-down-silos.html> (accessed 2013 йил 29-January).

Greenpeace. "Forests Victories - Greenpeace." *greenpeace.org*. <http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/en/campaigns/victories/forests-victories/> (accessed October 2012).

Heimbuch, Jaymi. "Treehugger." *Treehugger.com*. May 2, 2012. <http://www.treehugger.com/gadgets/are-e-readers-really-green.html> (accessed October 24, 2012).

Hutsko, Joe. "The New York Times green blog: Are e-readers greener than books." *The New York Times: A blog about Energy and the Environment*. August 31, 2009. <http://green.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/08/31/are-e-readers-greener-than-books/> (accessed October 24, 2012).

Johnson, Bobbie. "Google's power-hungry data centres - Environment - guardian.co.uk." *www.guardian.co.uk*. May 3, 2009. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2009/may/03/google-data-centres> (accessed October 2012).

Johnston, John. "The 9 Billion." *the9billion.com*. March 23, 2011.
<http://www.the9billion.com/2011/03/23/how-green-are-e-books-and-e-readers-infographic/>
(accessed October 24, 2012).

King, Cecilia. "Readers gravitating to e-books - The Washington Post."
www.washingtonpost.com. December 27, 2012.
http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/technology/e-book-readership-rises-sharply/2012/12/27/7cd0dbd6-503a-11e2-839d-d54cc6e49b63_print.html (accessed February 17, 2013).

Kolowich, Steve. "Blasting Academic Silos." *Inside Higher Ed.com*. 2010 йил 18-January.
<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/01/18/silos> (accessed 2013 йил 30-January).

Kotter, John. "Breaking Down Silos Q&A." *Forbes.com*. 2011 йил 3-Май.
<http://www.forbes.com/sites/johnkotter/2011/05/03/breaking-down-silos/> (accessed 2013 йил 29-January).

Levy, Steven. "Google Throws Open Doors to its Top-Secret Data Center - Wired.com."
www.wired.com. October 17, 2012. <http://www.wired.com/wiredenterprise/2012/10/ff-inside-google-data-center/all/> (accessed October 2012).

Lowman, Stephen. "Political Bookworm - Environmental impact of e-books vs. paper books."
www.washingtonpost.com. April 22, 2010. http://voices.washingtonpost.com/political-bookworm/2010/04/environmental_impact_of_e-book.html (accessed October 2012).

McArdle, Megan. "The Atlantic." *theatlantic.com*. August 25, 2010.
<http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2010/08/its-not-easy-being-green-e-readers-better-than-books-for-the-environment/62024/> (accessed October 2012).

Mohammed, Zaineb. "Are Your Kids' Books Killing Tigers? - Mother Jones."
www.motherjones.com. December 14, 2012. <http://www.motherjones.com/blue-marble/2012/12/harpercollins-children-books-rainforest-tiger> (accessed December 2012).

Moran, Nick. "Are e-readers really green?" *themillions.com*. May 1, 2012.
<http://www.themillions.com/2012/05/are-ereaders-really-green.html> (accessed October 24, 2012).

Norris, Daniel Goleman and Gregory. "Op-Chart - How Green Is My iPad? - NYTimes.com."
www.nytimes.com. April 4, 2010.
<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/04/04/opinion/04opchart.html> (accessed October 2012).

Palmer, Brian. "Brian Palmer - iPads and Kindles are better for the environment than books."
www.washingtonpost.com. August 24, 2010. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/23/AR2010082303608.html> (accessed February 2013).

Parker, Courtnie. "Going Green with eReaders." *Top Ten Reviews*. <http://ebook-reader-review.toptenreviews.com/going-green-with-ereaders.html> (accessed October 24, 2012).

Perkins, Nancy. "Why I'd Still Choose Paper Books over Digital Books - The Morton Report." *The Morton Report*. October 16, 2012. www.themortonreport.com/why-id-still-choose-paper-books-over-digital-books/ (accessed October 2012).

Schoeller, Martin. "A Glimpse Inside a Facebook Server Farm - Photo Essays - TIME."
www.time.com. 2012. <http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,2036928,00.html>.

Select Strategy. "Improving Performance by Breaking Down Organizational Silos."
Selectstrategy.com. 2002.
<http://selectstrategy.com/download/Breaking%20down%20organizational%20barriers.pdf>
(accessed 2013 йил 30-January).

"Sierra Club GreenHome e-readers vs old-fashioned books." *Sierra Club GreenHome*. December 2010. <http://www.sierraclubgreenhome.com/videos/e-readers-vs-old-fashioned-books%E2%80%944which-is-greener/> (accessed October 24, 2012).

Simpson, Ian. "Biggest readers in U.S. teens or 3-somethings: survey - Reuters." *reuters.com*. October 23, 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/10/23/us-usa-reading-idUSBRE89M06220121023> (accessed October 2012).

Sinpetru, Laura. "E-readers are not as green as one might think - Softpedia." *news.softpedia.com*. June 5, 2012. <http://news.softpedia.com/news/E-Readers-Are-Not-as-Green-as-One-Might-Think-273772.shtml> (accessed October 2012).

Smith, Neil. "To Build Your Business, Smash Your Silos." *Fastcompany.com*. 2012 йил 4-June. <http://www.fastcompany.com/1839317/build-your-business-smash-your-silos> (accessed 2013 йил 30-January).

Sparks, Carol Hansen Montgomery and JoAnne. "Framework for Assessing the Impact of an Electronic Journal Collection on Library Costs and Staffing Patterns." <http://dspace.library.drexel.edu>. 2000.

Sullivan, Andrew. "The Dish Andrew Sullivan: How Green Are E-readers?" *The Dish Andrew Sullivan*. May 9, 2012. <http://dish.andrewsullivan.com/2012/05/09/how-green-are-e-readers/> (accessed October 2012).

Thompson, Carol. "Recycled Magazine Paper." *thedailygreen.com*. July 26, 2010. <http://www.thedailygreen.com/environmental-news/latest/recycled-magazine-paper-460710> (accessed October 24, 2012).

Troll, Denise. "How and Why Libraries Are Changing: What We Know and What We Need To Know." *cmu.edu*. 1 1, 2002. http://repository.cmu.edu/lib_science/64 (accessed December 2012).

Vance, Ashlee. "Facebook: The Making of 1 Billion Users - Businessweek." *www.businessweek.com*. October 4, 2012. <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-10-04/facebook-the-making-of-1-billion-users#p4> (accessed December 2012).

Waugh, Rob. "Facebook unveils massive data center in Lulea, Sweden - Mail Online." *www.dailymail.co.uk*. October 28, 2011. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2054168/Facebook-unveils-massive-data-center-Lulea-Sweden.html> (accessed December 2012).

Author's biographies

Rosaria (Ria) Hawkins, Ph.D., is President of Take Charge Consultants and has more than 20 years of consulting experience. She is one of Take Charge's leadership and organization development experts. Her research on mindful leaders and their approach to organizational change provides leaders with a flexible process for sense-making and action-taking in a turbulent and changing world.

Valerie Ryder, Director of Information Strategy, has more than 30 years of industry experience, managing business and research libraries in the corporate sector, spearheading the print-to-electric migration of resources at a Fortune 300 company, implementing leading-edge technologies for information retrieval at a Fortune 50 company, and working as a solo librarian in the banking software industry. Valerie has a Master's of Library Science from the University of Pittsburgh, a Master's of International Business Management from Point Park University, and a B.A. degree in mathematics from the University of Rochester. She serves as President of the SLA Philadelphia Chapter and is a long-time member of the SLA Business & Finance Division and Leadership & Management Division.