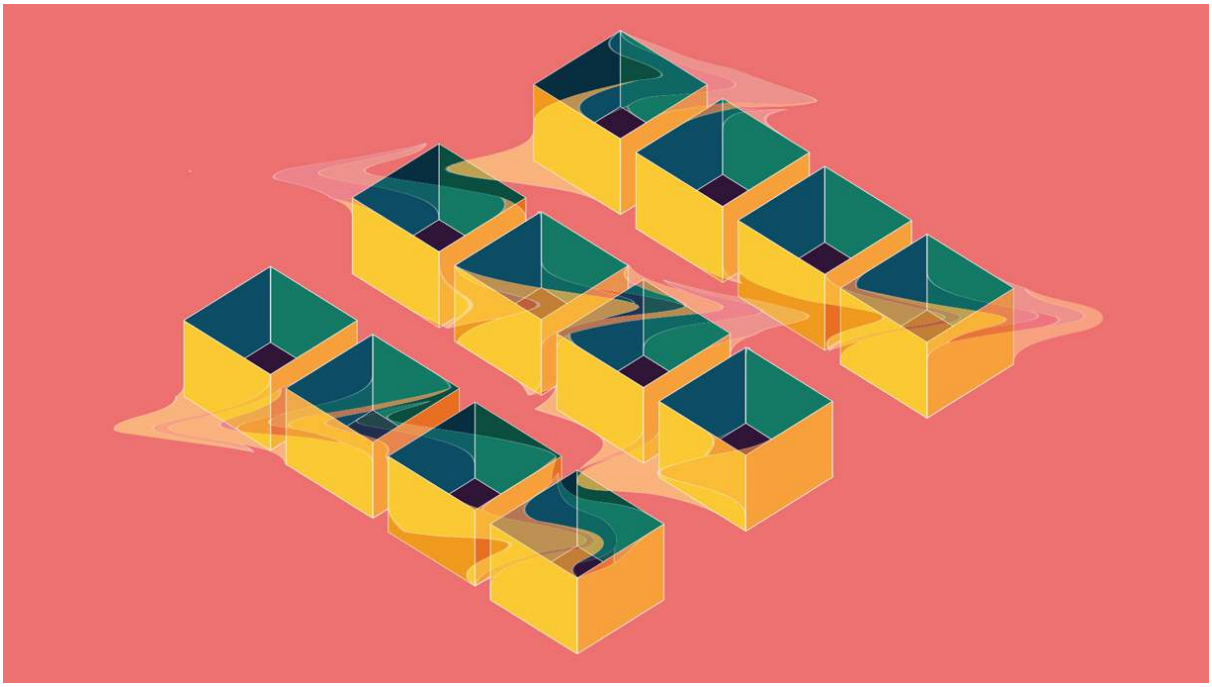
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Meetings

7 Strategies to Break Down Silos in Big Meetings

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Summary. Collaborating across departments can be a struggle. It's common for individuals of different disciplines to be disengaged in a group meeting, instead of contributing to a cohesive purpose and team. In fact, siloes have only gotten more prominent since the pandemic... **more**

When members of multidisciplinary teams are asked to describe their colleagues, many will say their peers are collegial, professional, and accomplished. While we would all love to be on a team that's not dysfunctional, behind this insipid description lurks a peril that is far from bland: the lack of collaboration between siloes.

It's very common for representatives of different disciplines to continue to operate in their own compartments instead of contributing to a cohesive purpose and team. In fact, siloes have only gotten more prominent since the pandemic began, as the circles we collaborate with have gotten smaller. And this becomes that much more noticeable in cross-departmental meetings, where each person focuses on their own priorities, showing little to no interest in others in the room. In response, the manager of the overall group tends to become the hardest working person in the meeting, with others only pulling themselves out of email to present their respective updates, then disengaging again when their turn is complete.

This is exactly what was happening to one of my clients, Shanna. Shanna led a cross-functional team and was struggling to get team leaders coordinated. During meetings, people would nod in agreement, but then afterward, nothing would actually get done. Frustrated at the lack of progress, Shanna asked me to observe her team in action. She couldn't understand how to garner commitment when everyone acted superficially amenable. I noticed in her meetings that Shanna was carrying all the weight. She asked for discussion items but when no one responded, she created an agenda all on her own. When others presented, she invited people to ask questions but, when met with silence, she'd jump in. It seemed like her team had an unspoken pact, "Don't poke around in my business, and I will return the favor."

Shanna's problem is not uncommon. To create a coordinated team from a collection of siloed individuals, you need to generate "cross talk" — conversations among team members about each other's areas of work. Here are seven strategies to get people talking in your next cross-functional meeting.

Become comfortable being uncomfortable.

If you want to change your team's behavior, start by changing yours. Allow yourself and others to feel some discomfort. Shanna made a list of ways she was over-participating and rescuing the conversation. She then communicated to her team that she would be changing those behaviors and increasing her patience for processing time as others considered responses. Yes, there were some awkward silences, but once people knew Shanna's changes were for real, they realized the only way out of the discomfort was to actually participate. For example, when an engineering colleague discussed their schedule, their finance counterpart asked questions to better understand engineering challenges that impact schedule and sharing the impact of a delay on their external stakeholders.

Set expectations in advance.

Some people prefer to prepare their responses, rather than jumping in spontaneously in meetings. Inform participants in advance not only that you'd like their participation but also what type of interaction you're expecting. Provide pre-reading if you can. For example, "At our next team meeting we will discuss topic X. Here is a summary of the market positioning research. Please come prepared to brainstorm ideas for our holiday season plans." In addition to brainstorming, you might have meetings to make decisions, receive feedback, or share opinions or research from different vantage points. When people know the topic, have background information, and

know what's expected of them, they are more likely to contribute fully, even outside their expertise.

Ensure participation.

Let people know it will be important to hear from everyone on key topics. If they agree with someone else, they can say, "plus one" rather than echoing the idea. If they really don't have anything to contribute, they can say, "pass." By requiring a pass or plus one, we raise the bar for participation and insert everyone's voice into the room.

Ask the right questions to generate questions.

Shanna used to solicit questions and, after a pause of about a microsecond, barrel ahead. She chose a different strategy to encourage interaction. Instead of saying, "Do you have any questions?" consider asking, "Who has the first question?" If there's silence, follow up with a joke, "OK, who has the second question?" and then allow the silence to sit long enough to allow people to come up with rich queries. Shanna learned not to fill silences and to ask more questions of her audience instead of the presenter. For example, "If a developer on your team heard this sales presentation, what questions would they have?" or, "What do you need to know to vote on this option?" Sometimes it's how you invite questions that results in quality responses.

Introduce response data.

Use the adage "we get what we measure" to your advantage by noting participation data about halfway through a meeting. Notice who is speaking, how much, in what order, and what they're contributing. Then say, "Halfway into the meeting, only four of us have spoken," or "John has been the first to speak each time the

presenter has asked for comments." Simply mention some data points and notice how participants choose to respond. Some of those who haven't spoken will start to participate, or "John" might step back and invite others to initiate responses.

Bridge intersections.

Avoid participants tuning out of topics not related to their specific departments by asking them to think about ways their work connects. For example, "How does what Suneeta shared impact plans for your department?" "What do you think the IT team will say when we communicate Y?" or "What do the goals of project X have in common with your objectives?" Deliberately bridging across departments increases the relevance of the discussion for a broader set of attendees. Their responses help shape a more robust solution that works across the organization and appears more seamless to the consumers of the work.

Mix it up.

The future of work is hybrid with a blend of in-person and virtual interactions. Not everyone will be comfortable voicing their opinions all the time. Create a variety of ways to gather input. In addition to verbal comments, ask for responses via chat, do a quick poll to calibrate opinions, or have everyone add text to a shared document. Adding more avenues for people to interact draws out the best ideas from a broader spectrum of personality types and increases the novelty of interaction over the drone of daily meetings. It harvests ideas more efficiently than always requiring contributors to vocalize them.

Shanna's team now engages actively on each topic. People rotate taking notes and facilitating. And they have recently made significant progress in defining their product strategy, which had been stalled for

the last six months.

The purpose of a team is to divide the workload across its members and multiply the benefits of generative thinking across siloes. As managers, we reduce the pressure we put on ourselves by encouraging collaboration and communication between departments, starting with cross-talk in meetings.

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