

PART ONE  
**Seven Vital  
Organizational  
Challenges**

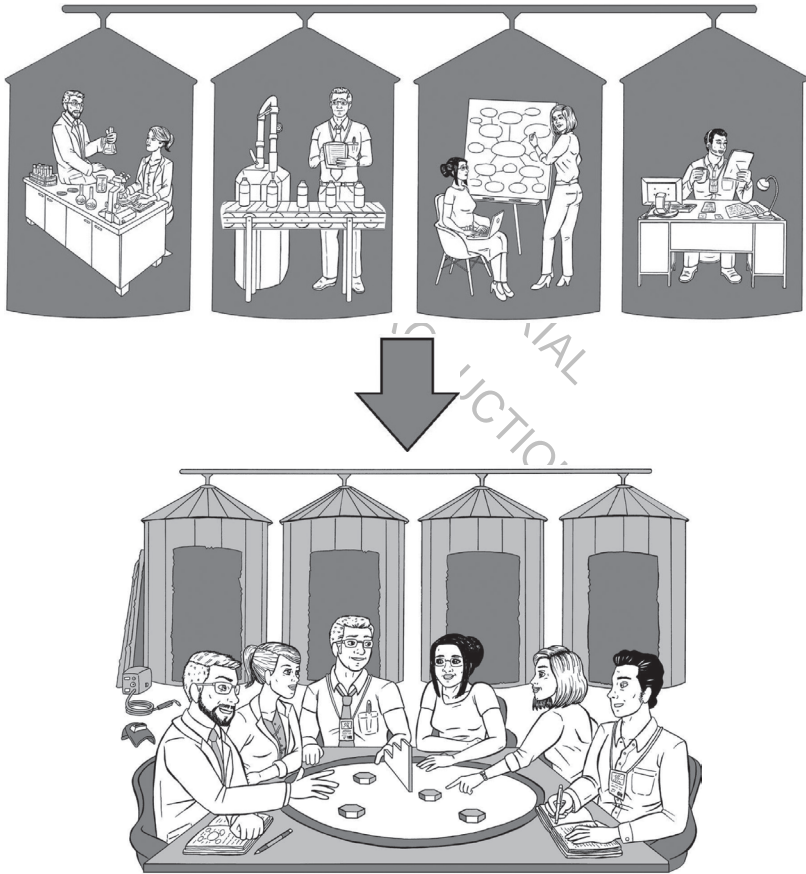
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**CHALLENGE 1**

# Breaking down silos

*And why games enable shared communication and mutual learning*



One of the biggest challenges organizations face is the constant and instant formation of silos; that is, formation of specialized knowledge groups. Even in small companies, this phenomenon seems to result in a downgrading of allocated time to communicate across teams and among individuals. Departments and separate teams are not problems as such; we need those specialized workforces. However, a lack of cross-communication can become a major problem. Managers know this issue will eventually arise and will result in potentially crucial declines in business if they do not attend to it regularly and systematically.

Communication across divisions, units, teams and individuals is not always regarded as an important factor in growth; however, we will argue that the ability to create time and space for communication impacts organizational culture as well as the ability to work together towards a common organizational goal. If this communication does not occur regularly, leaders risk unhealthy alienation between actors in organizations, long decision-making cycles, and a lack of alignment in terms of priorities and goals.

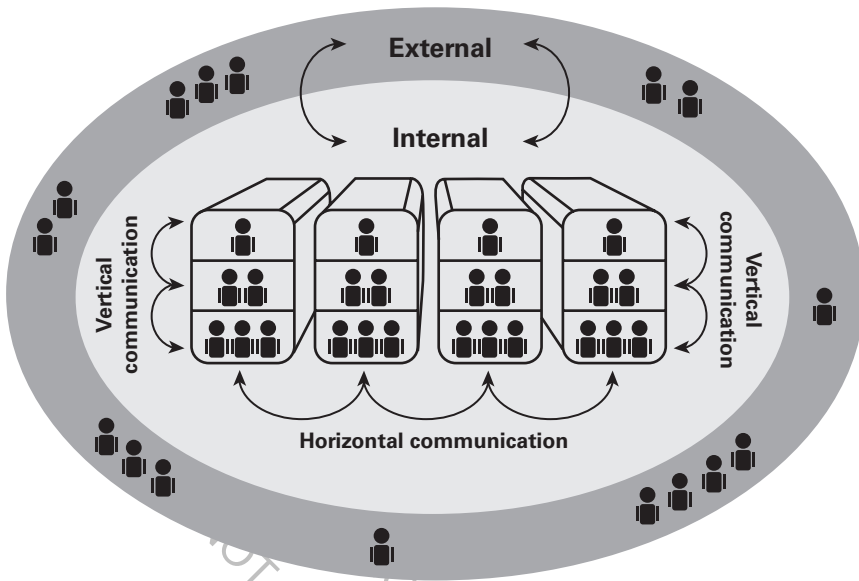
## Horizontal–vertical communication challenges

Through education and organizational experiences, professionals develop highly specialized skills and vocabularies. This continues for most of our working lives. As we gain work experience and develop specialized knowledge and language, we risk losing the ability to engage in strategic conversations and understand each other's viewpoints, interests, perspectives and practices. We call this the *horizontal* communication challenge in organizations (Figure 1.1).

Big organizations must apply top-level decisions all the way down the line. With management too distant, a high risk for employee dissatisfaction is ever present. Decision making is slow and complex and can result in going in circles. Because the information flow has to go through a series of channels, running up against walls for no particularly good reason will happen on a regular basis. As a consequence, the organization becomes less able to act on changes that occur outside of their own territory due to the front personnel or the intrapreneurial employee having limited action and feedback possibilities.

It is well-known that this phenomenon occurs in hierarchical organizational structures, but flat organizational structures also tend to struggle with it.

**Figure 1.1** Horizontal-vertical / internal-external silo challenge



The road employees take to find the right decision-maker for a specific matter becomes a complex journey, as do leaders' and managers' ability to communicate from a distance and ensure that employees have shared goals. We call this the *vertical* communication challenge (Figure 1.1).

## Internal and external communication challenges

We live in an age in which co-creation with customers, partners and stakeholders is increasingly common in complex organizational development situations (Table 1.1). In terms of consumer trends, employee motivation, partnerships and collaborations, people want to influence and co-create environments, tasks and solutions.

When organizational leaders and managers try to connect in different ways with employees, customers and partners, they must find common denominators and a communication format in which everyone can participate. This is a difficult task, since the process of putting organizational initiatives into practice is complex. Due to the increased number of organizations

**Table 1.1** Co-creation directions and discourses

	<b>Consumerism</b>	<b>Management</b>	<b>Policies and Politics</b>	<b>Strategic co-design</b>
Why co-creation	Consumers what influence.	Customers and partners can be active contributors.	Citizens want influence. Public sector under economic pressure.	Design/innovation processes involve a circle of stakeholders.
Co-creation reasoning	Consumer influence on products/services.	Value and market differentiator.	Resources, ideas, ownership, collaboration.	Stakeholder ownership and organizational embedding.
Potential positive effect	Consumer receives unique products. Companies have unique products/services.	New value creation/ capturing for both parties.	New policies and politics in line with citizen experiences. An active population.	Effective concepts that takes into consideration stakeholder constraints.
Potential negative effect	Consumers become a free labour force.	Customers as idea bank with no real effect.	Pseudo-citizen involvement only to support political agenda.	Stakeholders are stuck with old system of thoughts. Stakeholder communication overload.

with departments and teams in various countries, and given the cultural differences among them, we expect horizontal and vertical communication challenges will continue and intensify.

## A boundaryless organization

Some years ago, Jack Welch described the *boundaryless organization*, in which a series of structured and facilitated forums are systematically built into company activities (Ashkenas et al, 2015). Here, people with different functions and decision-making powers are brought together. Even though communication technologies have given us access to more information than we could ever have imagined, they have also led to increasingly complex matrix organizational structures. This means that the need for structured forums continues to exist and is perhaps more crucial today. According to Ashkenas and colleagues (2015):

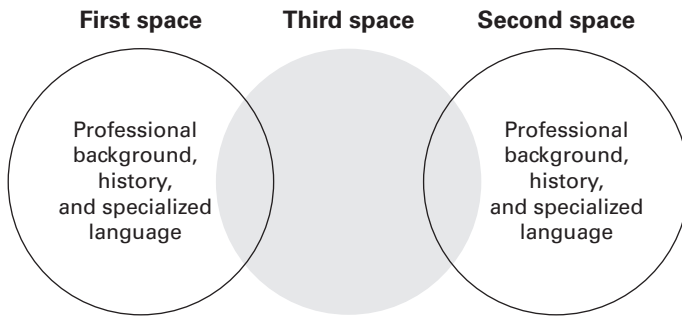
Each of these boundaries needs appropriate permeability and flexibility so that ideas, information and resources can flow freely up and down, in and out, and across the organization. The idea is not to have totally permeable boundaries or no boundaries – that would be ‘disorganization’. Rather, you want sufficient permeability to allow organizations to quickly and creatively adjust to changes in the environment.

In the Industrial Age success factors included size, role definition, specialization and control, but according to experienced and successful change management practitioners Ashkenas and colleagues (who drove several initiatives for the former CEO of General Electric, Jack Welch) new factors come into play – not necessarily as a replacement but as supplement – in the 21st century such as speed, flexibility, integration and innovation.

To create this boundaryless organization in practice, new rules apply. There is less focus on command and control and more focus on enabling activities where common language, shared mindset, and engaged and empowered employee initiatives flourish – this is not to say that accountability for performance is out of the picture, but it does mean that this is viewed and ‘measured’ in different ways.

## Third space communication

It is not enough simply to bring people together; they also require a structure for approaching the subjects at hand and, if possible, a somewhat neutral

**Figure 1.2** *Third space* illustration

setting in which to discuss them. We tend to call this *third space* communication (Muller, 2003) or, in other words, collaborative settings, including tools and techniques, that can build bridges between parties.

Figure 1.2 shows that participants always bring their professional background and history into play through specialized language, but also need to attend to the backgrounds that other participants have. Subsequently, one needs to understand the terminology they use, which is often taken for granted, while at the same time leave space open for a third inspirational space. Thinking carefully about settings, game approach, and participant backgrounds and interests will lead to better results in terms of collaboration; this, in turn, will lead to increased commitment and ownership. Additionally, improved articulation of how value is created and captured across departments will, in the long run, lead to easier collaboration and frictionless action taking.

### **Reason 1: reach mutual understanding and shared communication**

Games can advance the pursuit of boundaryless initiatives by targeting cross-communication internally between teams, units and so on, and between levels of hierarchy, as well as externally involving partners, suppliers and customers. Games are not a singular activity of such efforts, but they can open the ballet in an effective, highly engaged way. With the use of games, we seek to reach mutual understanding and shared communication. Above all, we want to establish a common language through which we can communicate and collaboratively engage in new organizational initiatives. This does not mean that conflicts – differences in opinions and interests – that arise when playing games are to be avoided.



On the contrary, they become positive and necessary incidents, as long as the games work with changes in perspective during the gameplay, since such changes increase understanding between parties. In addition, games either introduce novel approaches that take people beyond their routine practices, or they incorporate practices, experiences and working dilemmas, encouraging them to share these through the gameplay and in the context of a reflective knowledge-sharing agenda. All the games in this book build on this foundation and add thematic organizational challenges, to enhance quality, action-committed dialogues that will lead to new, concrete action in innovation initiatives or changes in practice.

Games are a common denominator for many people; very few have not at some point experienced a board game, a game-based activity or an online simulation. Given the structural layer of games, all participants are intuitively invited to participate; to some extent, this balances power among individuals. We regard this as a vital step towards understanding stakeholders with diverse viewpoints and professional expertise, and enabling alignment and ownership in organizational initiatives to arrive at beneficial alternatives to distant, instructional leadership.

**Table 1.2** Quick recap of Challenge 1 and Reason 1

<b>Challenge 1: Break down silos</b>
Horizontal and vertical lack of cross communication
Internal and external lack of communication
Finding <i>third space</i> opportunities
<b>Reason: Reach mutual understanding and shared communication</b>
Targeting cross-communication
Knowledge-sharing agenda
Quality, action-committed dialogues

## References

- Ashkenas, R, Ulrich, D, Jick, T and Kerr, S (2015) *The Boundaryless Organization: Breaking the chains of organizational structure*, John Wiley & Sons, New York
- Muller, M J (2003) Participatory design: the third space in HCI, in *The Human-Computer Interaction Handbook*, ed A Sears and J A Jacko, pp 1051–68, Lawrence Erlbaum, New Jersey