



“Small step to smashing silos: Tips for success” with Sheri Singer and Ray Arambula, as originally aired on June 11, 2020

Sheri Singer: Hi, everyone. Thank you for joining us today for Small Steps to Smashing Silos: Tips for Success. I'm Sheri Singer, president of Singer Communications, and I help associations solve their marketing, crisis communications, public relations challenges. Ray, do you want to introduce yourself?

Ray Arambula: Yes, thanks Sheri. My name is Ray Arambula. I am the director of IT for American Association for Respiratory Care, and I oversee all of the technology strategies and implementation of all of our technology here at AARC.

Sheri Singer: So let's jump right in. A silo definition from the BusinessDictionary is a mindset that's present when certain departments or sectors do not want to share information with others in the same organization. This type of mentality will reduce efficiency in the overall operation, decrease morale and contribute to the demise of a productive culture. This is the definition of a silo that we'll be using when we share this presentation with you.

So, why exactly do silos exist? Well for one, they occur naturally. They actually are indicative of people being more comfortable communicating with their colleagues in the areas that they work in than going outside of those environments. For example, if you're in the marketing department, you're probably more comfortable going to different people in your department, or maybe there's just one other person in your department, on a day-to-day basis to exchange communication and make sure that the projects go smoothly. But you might not be that familiar with walking down the hall to ask finance a question or to ask government relations a question. That's what we mean when we say silos occur naturally.

They're also the outcome of other much deeper rooted issues. We're going to talk about those issues as we go along so I'm not going to get into that now. But silos are really not the problem in and of themselves, they are really an outcome of deeper rooted issues. Silos may also exist because you have local goals versus organization or strategic goals. What I mean by that is... Let's use the example of the marketing department again. The marketing department might have a goal of getting out the annual meeting program and the organization goal might be to make X, Y, Z amount of dollars for the annual meeting, but the local marketing goal

may not be connected to the overall organization or strategic goal. Again, that could be alleviated if the marketing department was talking to the finance department, but we just talked about how the marketing department kind of wants to stay in and of their own.

Not playing nicely is another reason why silos might exist. I always think of this as the dreading walking down the hall scenario. I know this has happened to you, it certainly happened to me on a number of occasions where there's somebody in my organization, maybe another director or manager, that I just have a little bit of intimidation about or trepidation in talking to them. We don't necessarily have the best communication, smooth communications talking to one another. I know that I'm walking down the hall and I'm the marketing person and I might be going to talk to that finance person. As I'm walking down the hall, I can literally feel my palms start to sweat and I'm actually nervous about going in and talking to that person. So silos might exist because people are not communicating in a smooth way and they have a lot of trepidation around communicating with that person.

Silos may also create a lack of training or there may be a lack of consistent training that creates a silo. For example, if your IT department is introducing a new AMS and your communications department or marketing department, or even admin department, are not aware of how that new system might affect their day-to-day job, that could be a lack of training that's affecting the silos. Fundamentally, there's competition for resources within an organization. If you learn that 80% of a grant went to your government relations department, you might feel that, as somebody in communication, that's not really fair or whatever. You're competing on a day-to-day basis for resources, and not only financial resources, but also human resources. If IT is working very closely with your government relations department, what does that mean for your communications department?

These are some of the reasons why silos exist. Let's find out whether your organization is working in a silo currently. I want to run through a four-question, little quiz with you. Please take a minute to grab a piece of paper and a pen or pencil and we'll get started on this four-question quiz. Each of the questions has an A or a B answer, and I want you to just drop down A or B and I'll tell you what that means at the end of the quiz.

Let's get started. How do you run your meetings? Is it A, they're run from the top down or B, they include a free exchange of ideas? Next question, do your chapters or committees A, have different cultures or B, operate similarly and reflect your core values and your mission? Please write down A or B. Question number three, how effective are your communications methods? A, it's difficult to reach team members or B, it's easy to relay information between team members? The last question, what is the overall vibe of your staff? A, angry and demanding or B, everyone feels like a valued part of the team? If you answered mostly A or even one or two As, your organization is probably working in silos. Most associations have silos in their organizations. I'm going to turn it over to Ray so he can talk about what happens when these silos exist. Ray.

Ray Arambula: Thanks, Sheri. I think one of the things you'll notice right away is when you see little or unclear communication from the leadership team, and as a leader, your staff needs to understand what's happening in the organization. If not, you might start to see a breakdown in trust and you'll be missing out on opportunities to get feedback from your staff. Working with other departments is not always as easy as it looks. The processes or priorities can easily conflict with yours, and particularly in large organizations. But having a silo mentality will often result in misunderstandings and an unwillingness to cooperate with other departments. This can easily hamper efforts for innovation and creativity.

Another indication of silos might be when your departments prioritize their own objectives over the organization goals, and they start to lose sight of the bigger picture at play. I think we all would agree also that we need communication to keep things moving forward in the right direction. Now probably more than ever, it's essential that we stay in consistent communication. As leaders, we need to figure out what are the best ways to engage and communicate with our staff. As we now emerge or are now emerged into this digital workforce, it's important to utilize those technology resources you have, to keeping good, consistent communication with your staff.

What else do we see when silos exist? Your staff might be assigned to work on tasks or projects that cross other departments. Well, if there's a lack of communication or collaboration, you might not know if the work you're doing is simultaneously being worked on by somebody else. As a result, you end up with duplicate or inaccurate data and eventually a loss of productivity. You might also notice dissatisfied employees. A dissatisfied employee might also look like a disengaged employee, and an employee that's disengaged will likely become unhappy, unproductive, and overall have a negative attitude. This is likely a result of not feeling part of the team and it creates a risk of negative talk amongst other employees. Finally, the examples we provided can ultimately lead to bad member experience. Rather than being one seamless entity and speaking in one voice, the member may hear mixed messages through your various outlets, and as a result, members may view your association as disjointed or dysfunctional.

What we want to do next is just provide some tips that we think can really help break down those silos. It really starts at the top. Years ago when I started my first association job in IT, we were a staff of about 120. It was my first week and I had just moved from another state. I remember walking down the hallway and my CEO was walking towards me. I was going to give a simple hello and a head nod, but he walked into my path and he said, "Hey, Ray." He started to ask how it was getting situated and if there was anything that he could help out with, and to not hesitate to reach out to him. I had never met him before so I was just shocked that he even knew my first name. But it was that simple gesture that made me feel like I was welcomed and I was important.

I think that type of engagement needs to be carried out throughout the entire organization. Staff need to see their leaders set the tone for healthy

communication and collaboration. It should start with a shared vision. The work that leaders task to their staff should be in service of the vision. Conduct quarterly meetings to give staff the opportunity to bring forth their suggestions and comments. I think when you see engagement rise, you're going to see the productivity levels also rise and your staff will get more done and they'll feel better about doing it.

Talk is not cheap. It can become very easy for leaders to only manage and communicate about what's happening in their own departments. The leaders must also regularly communicate about changes happening throughout the organization. By not communicating organization goals, obstacles, or even issues, you could be missing out on opportunities to allow your staff to solve problems or even create the solutions. And when you do encounter these opportunities, share them with other staff members. Being in IT, it's easy to stay in the mindset of support mode. But because IT people are constantly involved with technology, and let's face it, technology is everywhere these days, there's a lot of tips and tricks that we use on a daily basis that could be helpful for other departments. Maybe you could start a lunch and learn, or next time you're creating that SOP, reach out to other departments, see if there's any cross-departmental processes that you can include. This type of sharing and communicating can help raise the level of productivity and efficiency throughout your organization.

Next I want to talk about an example, what we did in our organization. I'm fairly new to my organization and one of the things I was tasked with was to review our current technologies and determine what's working and what's not. We were using Microsoft Office 365, but not truly leveraging all of its capabilities. We decided to implement SharePoint and SharePoint is an online software solution that provides file management and collaboration. It was included with our office subscription but never utilized. The organization was used to managing their documents on file servers and their local computers. They'd been used to doing it this way for over a decade, so here I come along and propose a totally new way of managing their documents, and SharePoint is not just something you launch overnight. So before we implemented anything, we did a lot of in-person communication, demos, and Q&A.

We wanted everybody to understand the benefit and the rewards, but also the change that this was going to bring an impact to the organization. So next we decided to implement a pilot program and we used our marketing department as our guinea pig. I had worked with the marketing manager on smaller projects, and we both got along very well and we really saw this as an opportunity to improve what we're doing for the organization. The goal was basically to showcase how marketing improved their content management and collaboration by shifting their processes over to SharePoint. Initially there was a lot of excitement from both departments and early on we made sure to maintain consistent communication about the goals and the strategy and any changes that were happening. IT led the way on this, but we had to be careful to not always take the charge.

Being in IT for almost 20 years, it can be easy to treat this as a pure technology solution and implement it that way. I also learned that there was a lot of collateral damage left from the previous IT director. It was very much a top-down approach and I could tell the organization was not used to collaborating on a project. So it became very obvious that IT was one of the silos within our organization. Heading into the project, we conducted weekly meetings with the marketing and the communications team. As I anticipated, we did not have a lot of collaboration early on. Everyone was very hesitant to speak up or share any comments. I think everyone was used to being told, "This is how it is, and this is how we're going to do it."

So before we met as a group again, we decided to meet on a more informal individual basis. Our approach was not to ask or inquire about the project, but rather just stop by their desk, say, "Hello, how's it going? If they have plans for the weekend, et cetera." In doing so, we started to see a trust being built and our group meetings went from disengaged to effective collaboration. Now, I might've bought some donuts or treated some stuff to lunch, but I think staff needs to see gestures like that from time to time to really feel like they're part of the team. This initiative was launched in mid-February of this year and the coronavirus has certainly impacted our goals for this project. Our members are respiratory therapists, and so you can imagine our focus has changed quite a bit. But because early on we established a healthy working relationship with one another, the IT and marcomm departments are still able to continue moving on this project. There's a transparency and a comfort that wasn't there in the past. This makes it easy to check in with one another and get status updates, even while working remotely. Next I want to turn it over to Sheri, and she'll continue on some tips for breaking down your silos.

Sheri Singer: Thanks, Ray. The next section is working toward common goals. The number one thing your organization needs to have to work towards common goals is a purpose. I like to refer to this as the why of the organization. What's your mission, and how do the tactics that everybody on your staff does every day contribute to that mission? It's really the why that's driving your organization. And then once you establish what that why is, and it might be different for each department but should definitely be all gearing towards the mission of the organization, especially in associations, we're so lucky to work for mission-driven organizations, then the next thing you need to do is ensure that all the staff, from the receptionist to the ED or the CEO, understands that goal or that purpose. Once you have the why and staff understanding the goal and the purpose, you then can really start moving towards some common goals and breaking down those silos.

I want to say something about strategic planning. We all know how strategic planning works. We get this C-suite people together, or maybe it's the board of directors, and they're in a room for a day, day and a half and they're working with a strategic facilitator that you might've brought in from the outside, or maybe your ED or CEO or board president is leading that effort. And after the two days, filled-up

white boards, you come up with a strategic plan and it's 20 pages and it goes into this beautiful binder and it sits on your shelf gathering dust. I would encourage you, if you haven't done this already and I know a lot of associations have already moved to this format, to create your strategic plan in a one-page grid, so that you have your overarching, your mission, your why at the top, some strategic goals following that. Each department has their own tactics that they will do to meet the ultimate mission and the why of your organization.

I think if you have that one-page document, it makes it so much easier to tack it up on a corkboard right behind you or whatever, and look at it every day, rather than having that big clunky binder in on the shelf behind you, just gathering some dust. You also, to break down silos, want to create a unified vision of team collaboration. You really want your team to be working together. One thing that you can do to do that is positioning each staff person as an expert. You might be thinking to yourself, "Well, my assistant or the receptionist can't be an expert." But actually maybe in COVID-19 they can. Perhaps they teach yoga at a studio as a sideline job. At this time of great stress for anyone, maybe they could take up a couple of minutes at the end of a staff meeting and talk about meditation or using yoga as a means to wellbeing and self-care.

You also want to be able to integrate activities to encourage collaboration and Ray's example was one really good one between the IT and the marketing department, but there are other examples that can be used as well. The finance department really has its hands in every one of the association departments. Perhaps they should start setting up meetings with each department as a group. The other thing I wanted to talk about a little bit... go back to talking about positioning your staff as experts. I think once you do that, you start to break down the hierarchy of the organization and you start to be able to see each staff person as an expert at something. That flattens the curve of hierarchy and makes all your staff members as valuable as other staff members, and then it's easier to integrate everybody into all the activities that are going on.

I want to wrap up this section by talking a little bit about getting input from all the departments for every major project. For example, if you're putting out, let's say, an e-newsletter and you have three stories that you put into that e-newsletter every week for your members, and you're only dealing with the departments that are putting out that newsletter with you, this week it might be finance, GR and communications and next week it might be three other departments, you don't need input from all of your departments for every project. But, when you're dealing with something like the annual meeting that affects every department in your organization, it's really important to get input from all of the different departments. Let me give you an example of what happens when you don't get that input. For example, you're asking your marketing department to write the brochure and all of the marketing materials and the program that is going to be for the annual meeting. That makes sense because your marketing department is going to be promoting your annual meeting as one of their major tasks for the year.

If the marketing department is not talking to the learning department, you automatically have silos that are going to affect the outcome of the annual meeting. So at the beginning, the learning department and the marketing department should be talking on a regular basis. How many sessions are there going to be? How do I lay out the program? Are they going to be 100 sessions or 20 sessions? How many keynotes are there going to be? How many game changers or other sort of special events are you going to have? Once those two departments are talking to each other, you're going to have an outcome of a better program, a more coordinated program, and ultimately better marketing for your annual meeting.

I know a lot of us are not doing annual meetings right now, but we are doing a lot of things in virtual meetings. I think that even in a virtual context where your marketing department is pushing out the announcement of these meetings, you need to be coordinating those efforts. The last thing that Ray and I wanted to bring to your attention is measuring and reporting the successes of everything that you're doing. I have a former client who did such a great job of this. It was the best effort I've ever seen in my 20-some of working with associations. This client was the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association, and they represent everyone who has anything to do with toll roads.

We were trying to get this association a seat at the table with the big boys like American Trucking and American Bus. At the time, Congress was working on the Transportation Infrastructure Bill and they hadn't had a Transportation Infrastructure Bill in 10 years. IBTTA wanted to be at that policy table with ATA and ABA. We launched a program called Moving America Forward that consisted of white papers and reports and studies. They all contained infographics and graphs and charts to really clearly illustrate how toll roads were part of the solution for America's transportation infrastructure.

As a result of our efforts, we were in the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times and a number of other outlets and a lot of trade press. We got written up by some influencers online. My client was so smart in being able to report every one of these successes to his members. It really made a huge difference in the way the members were perceiving the value of the organization. I know a lot of times we get stumped on time to do the actual measuring and reporting, but I would encourage you to really pay attention to measuring and reporting, and then giving that information back to your members so they feel that they have achieved something, they feel value in the membership. That's our tips for Smashing Silos: Small Steps for Success.

Thank you very much for being with us today, and I hope you get a lot out of the rest of the Surge Conference.