

Effects of Siloed Workstreams on Organizational Trust and Engagement

Amanda C. Kelly

School of Leadership Studies, Gonzaga University

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Dr. David Hougum

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Organizations today are faced with continual challenges while navigating an ongoing global pandemic. In this time of continued uncertainty, many individuals are exploring how their careers or current organizations align (or do not align) with their own values. As a result, organizations must prioritize building trust – by championing a working environment where open dialogue is encouraged, and employees feel their contributions are valued – as a critical component to effective engagement and retention of employees. Prioritizing the development of trust through transparent and open communications across an organization is critical, especially as many businesses struggle with the adjustment between in-person and virtual business models. Sarker, et al. (2011) studied globally distributed, virtual teams with an objective "... to understand the simultaneous effect of communication and the closely related construct of trust on individual performance" (p. 280) and their research confirms that "...communication leads to performance through trust" (p. 302).

I work for a large company with several business units that are quasi-independent, but in reality, fall under the same organizational umbrella. This umbrella includes a set of guiding tenets, or "Leadership Principles" (Amazon, 2021), which help define how we make decisions, prioritize our programs and efforts, how we interact with one another, and how we serve our customers. One of these core principles is "Earn Trust", which is meant to be the fundamental basis for how we approach relationships with our customers, stakeholders, and colleagues, how we build and nurture our teams, and, how we ensure overall organizational success.

It is the principle of trust which is imminently threatened by what I view as the largest organizational issue we face today, which is siloed workstreams accompanied by closed-off communication channels. When siloed workstreams and closed communication channels exist,

we must consider the potential for negative impact on mutual trust within teams and in leader/follower relationships, overall team performance, and employee commitment to the organization. Not only does this practice erode trust and decrease engagement in the organization by contributing to the rise of redundant work efforts, but it also stifles innovation and collaboration across the business.

In this paper I will explore the negative impact that siloed workstreams can have on earning and maintaining trust in an organization's culture utilizing Dr. Michael Carey's "Five Frames Model", from his book *Heraclitean Fire: Journeying on the Path of Leadership* (1999). I will summarize this exploration by offering a comprehensive solution to establish an environment that recognizes the critical role of transparent communication and collaborative workstreams in providing a foundation where mutual trust and authentic collaboration will flourish.

The Rational Frame

The rational frame is concerned with the structure of, and specific roles within, the organization (Carey, 1999). As a result, leaders place their focus on organizational structure including roles, hierarchy, and strictly defined processes. Within this defined structure, the unique purpose of an individual is subordinate to the overall purpose of the organization.

In the rational frame, issues caused by siloed workstreams and limited communication channels would reflect bad organizational structure, and best solved by reorganization. Based on my own experience, multiple reorganizations and shifting of teams or organizational structure can decrease feelings of trust and safety, which diminishes engagement and commitment. This rational frame approach would further add to the existing dysfunction, as it assumes humans are

replaceable or interchangeable resources which can be inserted anywhere into the (appropriately leveled) organizational structure to solve a problem (Carey, 1999). As observed in *The Great Thing in an Organization*, when individuals are treated as replaceable resources, there is "violence done to their identity and integrity", and this treatment "murders the spirit" (Palmer, 2010, 1:37).

When individuals have multiple managers or job changes due to reorganizations, their desire to engage and contribute can easily erode, along with their trust in the organization and its leadership. This erosion would further contribute to additional siloed, closed-off working practices and fuel organizational dysfunction as individuals would be reluctant to share findings or new ideas with others.

The Human Frame

In the human frame, Carey (1999) recognizes that the organization is a vehicle for satisfying healthy human needs, and the integration of organizational goals and needs of individuals is paramount for both to be successful and productive. "The manager whose frame is human focuses on the people who do the work, and on their emotional, psychological, and physical health" (p. 59).

In the human frame, a lens of empowerment is essential in addressing organizational issues, as leaders' attitudes towards their employees have a significant impact on the health of the organization. Engagement could be positively impacted by leaders who trust their followers with the responsibility to prioritize and complete their work, as their own individual goals are integrated with the overall goals of the organization (Mc Gregor, 1960 and 1966, as cited in Carey, 1999). In contrast to the rational frame, the human frame encompasses the ideal that "...to

alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects" (Freire, 2000, p. 85).

In reviewing the issue caused by working in siloes, the human frame suggests that dysfunction will continue in any organization which does not recognize the importance of individuals who are empowered to engage in open, transparent communication as a critical component of organizational health. Despite this focus, balance in this frame may be difficult to achieve, as the encouragement of self-directed teams where employees determine their own priorities and responsibilities could lead to greater instances of siloed workstreams that are duplicative, or even contradictory, in their goals and intended outcomes.

The Systems Frame

Leaders in the systems frame address organizational issues through a lens of adaptability. The systems frame, with its focus around interconnectedness, suggests that many different paths can lead to the same result (Carey, 1999). Leaders should be open to the many possible ways in which goals can be achieved, or that problems can be solved, as the organizational environment is dynamic, and organizational issues are resolved by applying what they consider to be the most optimal solution to a particular organizational problem at that moment in time.

The systems frame may seem to be the best suited to neutralize the issue around of siloed workstreams and communication channels by embracing those separate workstreams, as this frame recognizes that "no social structure is self-sufficient or self-contained" (Carey, 1999, p. 65). However, a world of constant adaptation, continuous change and reactive solutioning could easily have a similar effect on employee engagement, commitment, and trust as the rational frame, where issues may be solved by reorganizing and restructuring.

Northouse (2022) evaluates the Path-Goal Theory of leadership, which "... presumes that leaders possess the advanced communication skills necessary to swiftly jockey between the various leadership behaviors to effectively interact with followers in all given situations" (p. 143). The challenge of this presumption is similar to the theme of adaptability in the systems frame. Continually adapting to different behaviors, or different potential solutions could contribute to dysfunction by encouraging the development of additional reactionary, situational workstreams.

The Political Frame

The political frame takes a very different approach to organizational health, as it thrives on negotiations and conflict (Carey, 1999). In this frame, the organization is defined by the scarcity of resources and their allocation. Organizations are comprised of coalitions, and the prioritization of goals is determined by how much power any one coalition brings to a negotiation. The political frame embraces conflict as "... the inevitable consequence of organizational life" (p. 73). Because of this focus on negotiation, tactics, and limited resources, competition is an overarching theme.

The establishment of mutual trust and collaborative workstreams is challenging to imagine in an environment categorized by power, conflict, bargaining, and negotiation. Palmer (2017) notes that "People who confine themselves to organizational infighting often become obsessed with internal enemies possessed by the demons of institutions" (p. 176). Carey (1999) confirms this observation, stating that in the political frame, people are very likely to focus on identifying "...hidden agendas, even where there are none" (p. 76).

This environment is highly likely to fuel the development of closed, secretive communications and carefully guarded workstreams generated by one coalition or group, intended to alienate others by putting them at a disadvantage. Siloed efforts would be apt to flourish in the political frame with its intense competition for resources and funds, and any collaborative solution would be impacted due to only those with the most power determining how organizational priorities are set. This would further cement a fractured organizational structure which thrives on the very power differential which the political frame highlights.

The Cultural Frame

In the cultural frame, organizational challenges are addressed in a "culture first" mentality. In this frame, Carey (1999) maintains that organizational meaning is shaped for (not by) the individual participants; basic assumptions and beliefs are collectively shared by all members of the organization. This framework takes time to establish, "... as the original leader or founder applies his or her priorities to the challenges or problems of the organization..." (p.84).

I have noted that my current organization prides itself on a series of "Leadership Principles" which were crafted by our founders to define our values and culture (Amazon, 2021). We look to these guiding principles as we construct solutions to any challenge or opportunity within our workspace. As "Amazonians", we are meant to collectively share these beliefs, our "peculiar" ways of approaching challenges, which is seen as part of our cultural strength. Within the context of the cultural frame, the celebration of these "peculiar" ways serves as a symbol intended to highlight what makes our organizational culture unique and special, even when those peculiarities may be impacting effective engagement or mutual trust.

Organizational dysfunction surrounding siloed workstreams and closed communication channels thrive in the cultural frame, as it "... expects that others in the setting treat the behavior as normal and expected" (Carey, 1999, p. 83). Individuals operating in this frame will in fact accept this dysfunction as part of the norm and in turn, solidify the continuation of that practice within the organization. Individuals adopt the "it has always been done this way" mindset as a universal truth.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The largest area of organizational dysfunction I have identified through my own experience is siloed working environments and their closed communication channels. This paper has explored the impact this dysfunctional practice has on earning and maintaining trust within the organization through the lens of the "Five Frames" (Carey, 1999). This exploration shows the rational frame seeking a solution to siloes by looking at the organizational structure and carefully defined roles. The human frame attempts to align the needs of individuals with the overall health of the organization to achieve a more collaborative environment. The systems frame tells us that many siloed processes could lead to the achievement of a singular goal, and adaptability is key to finding the most appropriate solution at any given time. The political frame thrives on bargaining, negotiation, and power, and in turn fuels the siloed framework as we experience competition for scarce resources such as time and funds. Finally, as the cultural frame defines organizational meaning for the participants in it, so the assumptions about siloed workstreams as norms are universally accepted. In this frame, and a mindset of "we have always done it like this, so it must be right" can easily prevail.

As I reflect on the theme of "What I do Want as a Leader", I envision a foundation of mutual trust, collective respect, and transparent communication. Freire (2020) observed,

"Founding itself upon love, humility and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence" (p. 91). These are critical elements for success in alleviating this organizational dysfunction.

Northouse (2022) notes that "Communication is the vehicle through which leaders and followers create, nurture, and sustain useful exchanges. Effective leadership occurs when the communication of leaders and followers is characterized by mutual trust, respect, and commitment" (p. 168). This further supports Freire's (2000) dialogical theory of action, where "... subjects meet in cooperation in order to transform the world" (p. 167). Mutual trust and transparent communication thrive in an environment of authenticity, truth and collaboration. Once that cooperation occurs, we can create organizational change.

I propose the formation of a community who are empowered to collectively push organizational boundaries by approaching solutions from a subject-centered viewpoint. This would help alleviate the dysfunction threatening our organization today and begin to create lasting change. In *The Courage to Teach*, Palmer (2017) explores the idea of a cooperative "community of truth" based on transparent, authentic, and equitable communication. He states, "... when authentic community emerges, false differences in power and status disappear..." (p. 141). Through this community, the subject becomes the center of exploration.

When exploring organizational challenges from a subject-centric lens, we can develop and enact meaningful change across the organization. We then open the dialogue to find the common threads and actively participate in building a solution that will encourage the development of trust and increase organizational effectiveness. The subject-centric lens aligns with the observations of Freire (2000) who notes that "Through dialogue, the teacher is no longer merely one who teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students... They

become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (p. 80). In a place where mutual growth is a desired outcome, authentic connection and honest, transparent communication must exist. Dr. Brene Brown maintains that connection is the natural result of authenticity.

"Connection is why we are here; it gives meaning and purpose to our lives". (TED, 2010). In turn, it is difficult to imagine a place of authenticity without vulnerability. Brown proposes that vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and (perhaps most importantly), change (TED, 2012).

If we can evolve as an organization and truly dive into the need for change to our existing dysfunction, we must begin by developing a community which embodies vulnerability, authenticity and transparency. This community will be able to approach issues from a subject-centered lens, focused on mutual growth, and push existing organizational boundaries to achieve goals which will impact the health of the entire organization in a collaborative framework, ensuring mutual trust and continued engagement.

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