Looking Down the Organizational Stovepipe

Could the short-term results be obscuring good long-term vision?

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A

mazing for me to think that this is my 20th editorial on

these pages. One of my themes over the years has been

to share stories that challenge bridge professionals to expand

their thinking about business and professional needs. These

messages included topics such as teamwork, staying engaged

with the profession, and encouraging them to look into who

or what causes change in the industry and our profession. A

recent conversation with a former colleague falls under this

same theme: how do we encourage employees to be experts

but not stunt their professional growth.

My former colleague was urgently searching for qualified

concrete design engineers. We discussed how long it takes

before their engineers-in-training and young professional

engineers “move forward” to become project managers. It

usually happens quickly, and we agreed that the time is much

too short. Generally, companies need to nurture their young

engineers and reward “technocratic growth.” As used here,

“technocracy” is a system of management where decision-

makers are selected based on technological knowledge and

expertise. However, as I thought about the conversation, I

realized that the issue at this company was not unique.

Are companies pursuing management practices and/or

organizational structures to encourage cross-training early

at the expense of more thoroughly developing future subject-
matter experts in their fields? Vertical movement within the

organization can be a detriment to highly skilled technicians

and designers who might otherwise lose the technical work

they do if they had other opportunities for recognition and

reward beyond a move up the corporate ladder.

The Corporate Stovepipe

Word Spy defines stovepipe organization as “An

organizational model in which departments, managers, and

employees have a narrow and rigid set of responsibilities.”

A frequent challenge in these types of organizations is to

maintain internal communication across departments.

However, in working to maintain or develop good internal

communications, extreme care must be exercised to not

override or even compete with the development of a strong

component of subject-matter experts.

Management expert E.J. Muller said, “One of the first

things company executives confronted was the failure of

the traditional ‘stovepipe organization’ to generate greater

responsiveness to customers. . . . That realization led

management to examine ‘pipeline,’ rather than stovepipe,

management concepts.” These organizations work to grow

leaders through the pipeline and reward employees that

identify areas of focused expertise.

The business concept to break down internal stovepipes

started as an effort to create better internal communication

with the end results focused on customer service. However,

it may have, in fact, created a work place environment that

diminishes the growth and development of subject-matter

experts. We must develop pragmatic, tangible business

solutions to avoid the reasons people and organizations drift

back to stovepipe, without losing the pipeline to developing

our skilled technical experts.

What is your experience with the effective
development of technical experts in your company

or others you’ve worked for? Are gifted engineers

asked to take on too much to enhance their earning

potential, to the detriment of the engineering department? Do you agree that we still need the

wizards and not everyone needs or wants to be the

creative one? I’d appreciate hearing your experiences

on this topic.

There are generally five organizational structures:

functional, divisional, matrix, team, and network.

Functional—organized by broad business activities—

Executive leadership, Finance, Marketing, HR, and

Production. Very organized chain of command so that

workers can easily communicate within their unit.

Interdepartmental coordination and communication suffers.

Divisional—work groups that align according to customers

or geography. Some duplicative functions and less efficiency

and economy. May cause interdivisional rivalries. Advantage

is it serves the customer better.

Matrix—combines divisional into functional. Teams benefit

from the expertise of the members while the functional

hierarchy evaluates the business activities. Disadvantage

is everyone has two bosses.

Team—company operates without chain of command.

Virtually flat organizational chart. Without a hierarchy

oversight, the risk is employee control. Staff must be trained

for broad challenges.

Network—company employs fewer subject-matter

experts and relies on a cadre of outside companies to fill

business functions.