

Foxholes, not Silos

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“it’s bad to treat
disciplines as separate
silos”

Is a “silo” really a good
metaphor for an
academic discipline?

Our use of “silos”

(as far as I can tell) From Phil Ensor, “organization development consultant” in 1988 for the Association for *Manufacturing* Excellence

The Functional Silo Syndrome

AME Target, p. 16, 1988

Phil S. Ensor

Editor's comment: Several months ago Phil Ensor coined a phrase, “functional silo syndrome.” It caught on, and AME has a study group

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Organizational Renewal— Tearing Down the Functional Silos

AME Study Group on Functional Organization

AEM Target, pp 4–16, 1988

Some say that the typical U.S. corporation never was competitive. Tom Peters, co-author of *In Search of Excellence*, says that American dominance of the world's markets during the three decades

functional silo syndrome,” as AME has chosen to label it.

What is the Functional Silo Syndrome?

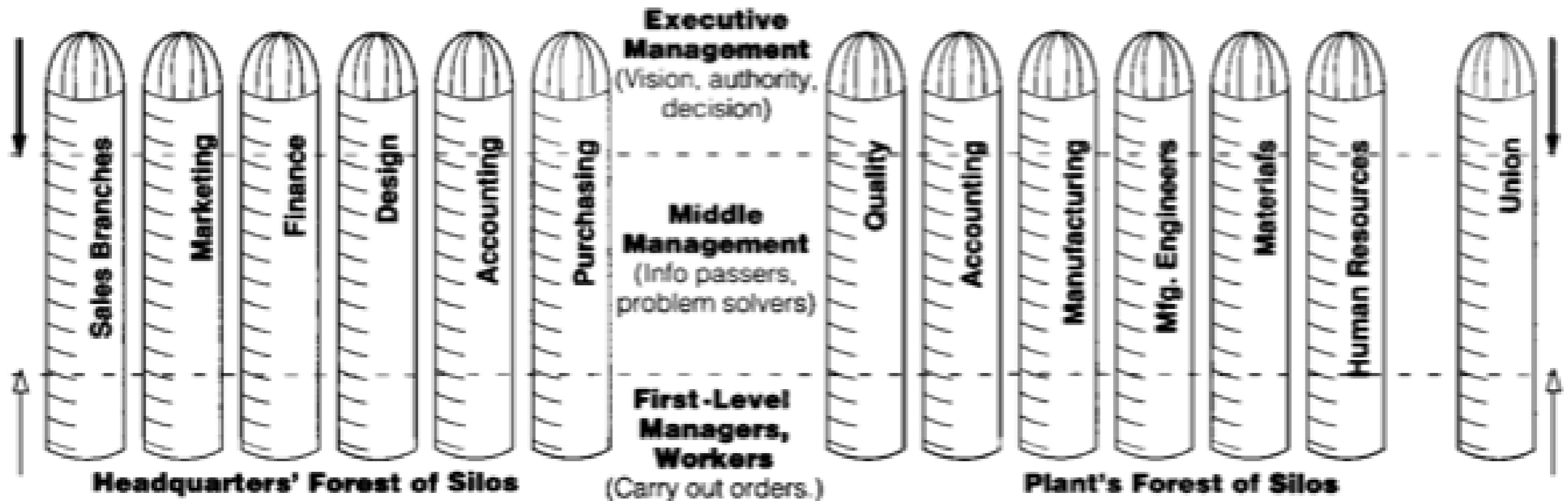
The classic functions of a man-

Why Is the Functional Silo a Serious Problem?

Bureaucracies have been around a long time. Their well-known frustrations have been the subject of several generations of

Key AEM image

The Functional Silo Syndrome



Note that the paths of energy and activity flow mainly from the top down. There is very little bottom-up feedback (participation) and inter-functional communication is difficult. The union is even further isolated.

Good metaphors should

- Say what we want them to say
- Not say what we don't want them to say
- Work as proxies: thinking about the metaphor leads to relevant insight

What we are trying to say:
“Don’t stop talking to each
other”

In defense of (actual)
silos

Actual silos...

Protect your grain from rot and pests

Separate corn, wheat, barley, etc.

Help farmers get their product to market



Actual silos...

Can be very pretty

Evoke fond memories (at least in old folk)



Actual silos...

Keep your round barn from falling down



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The good things about silos
remind me of
good things about
academic disciplines

Academic disciplines

- Conserve civilization
- Help Academics focus
- Are convenient management units
- Can strengthen each other (Biology and Philosophy, for example)
- Are “places” where specialists can share what is beautiful about their “specialty”
- Evoke fond, fond memories in foolish, fond old academics

The “silos” metaphor doesn’t do what we want it to

- It implies that we are, or that we produce, commodities
- It makes us forget/devalue the good things about having separate disciplines
- It is sterile: is the solution to destroy academic “silos”?

Let's think carefully
about our metaphors

Is this really what we want?



What you know

Your colleagues

Your papers, books,
theorems, paintings,
arias, samples, ...

“Foxholes” is a better
metaphor

“Don’t stay in your foxholes” means

- Don’t stop talking to each other
- We’re all in this together
- Don’t become “entrenched” (create knowledge)
- Advance together when it’s appropriate (be “interdisciplinary”)
- Dig new foxholes when appropriate (protecting new disciplines)

Some pushback

- I am not happy with the militarism of “foxholes” and the violence of an implied war
- I do not like the rigid administrative hierarchy this implies
- I recognize that the consequences of failing in a foxhole are far worse than those of failing in academia

Maybe gardens would be a better metaphor?

Acknowledgements

- Kurt Queller, University of Idaho, English

Discussion?

Definitions

- *Originally*: a hole in the ground for storing grain, manure, or provisions (hence “silage”; from Greek σιρòσ)
- *19th century, OED*: a container, sometimes cylindrical (first used 1873)
- *1958, OED*: A place to keep your nuclear missiles
- *1988: Management*: A separate area of managerial responsibility
- *Something you don't want to turn your discipline into*

What is a silo?



How many thought of this?



Or one of these?



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How about this?



I know...

