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# Strategies for Success

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## Silo Busting

By Leta Beam, President, Vantage International

I began my professional career as an analyst in a large health insurance company and, being a natural “connector,” I was singled out and told to “stop talking and get to work!” It was a powerful message— at that organization, working in isolation in one’s cubicle was the preferred way to get the job done. As I assumed leadership roles in the organization, I said those same words to others.

There is a wonderful irony in the fact that, years later, as a leadership and business coach, I get to work with health care organizations and encourage them to “start talking and get to work!”

I find that health care organizations suffer from internal functional barriers that get in the way of achieving the level of success that they want and need.

***Silo thinking. Silo visioning. Silo mentality.***

No matter what you choose to call it, it seems so widespread in health care organizations that it may be considered inevitable by some. But it is not inevitable.

Silo thinking is evident in an organization when departments, divisions, units, or teams focus only on their own work—their internal goals and objectives. Usually, I find that these groups or individuals are performing well—**but not well enough**. They often fail to choreograph their activities across the organization to achieve peak organizational performance.

From my experience, silo thinking evidences itself most frequently in health care organizations as:

- an unproductive rivalry between operational and clinical teams; and
- an unhealthy tension between a primary service department, for example, the trauma unit, and departments offering key support services, such as radiology, laboratory, or pharmacy.

Sometimes it is subtle, while in other situations it is obvious. Sometimes it extends from the executive offices down through individual staff members. Usually, it is an energy draining, frustrating experience that distracts staff from what is most important: taking great care of patients, clients, employees, and partners.

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Here are some of the symptoms of silo thinking:

- As a leader, you frequently mediate conflicts among your direct reports.
- There are predictable and often longstanding patterns of disconnection between or among certain functional areas that result in chronic miscommunication, internal competition, blaming, and short-sighted solutions to challenges.
- Internal audits regularly capture evidence of duplication of work.
- There is an “us versus them” culture within the organization’s departments.
- Individuals and teams maintain “police records” on other individuals or teams that are intended to justify and perpetuate disconnection.
- Trust among peers is low.
- There is significant turnover among middle management, where the negative consequences of silo thinking are experienced most: the middle of an organization is often a tough place to live.

Most often, silo thinking is not the function of an individual or even the organization’s structure. The real cause is systemic and silo busting requires systems’ solutions.

Here are some of the ways that other organizations are creating breakthroughs and sustaining new levels of collaboration:

- Start talking and get to work! When you are not talking, actively listen to someone else who is talking.
- Establish cross-functional teams at different levels within the organization to get key people to “start talking and get to work.”
- Focus cross-functional teams on a compelling performance challenge.
- Make a commitment to hold cross-functional meetings for an extended period, if not permanently. This allows the topics to naturally reach deeper and deeper levels of challenge and change.

- Start talking about subjects that are often off-limits in many organizations—such as truth telling and trust.
- Identify differing opinions, new thoughts and ideas, and skillful debate as positive fuel for the organization.
- Change people’s behavior by changing people’s perception of their work. Think systematically about measuring performance and reward “joined up” solutions that represent systems thinking.
- Equip people with basic coaching skills to sustain changes in longstanding patterns of interaction.
- Even today, when none of us needs one more meeting, adopt a leadership mindset that says, we cannot afford not to meet as a cross-functional team.

One of my favorite quotes is a line from Elizabeth Moss Cantor: “Change done by me is an opportunity; change done to me is a threat; all change looks like failure in the middle.”

You may be pleasantly surprised to learn that silo busting will be embraced by many people who are weary of and frustrated with the way things are. I have not seen or heard of an organization that has committed to silo busting, seen it through, and was not the better for it. Results include: enhanced learning, increased profitability, retention of key talent, and a better quality of work life.

HANYS Solutions, Inc. (HSI) has collaborated with Vantage International, a premier leadership and business coaching firm, to offer HANYS’ members access to results-oriented individual, team, and organizational coaching services. For more information on Vantage International and leadership and business coaching, contact Leta Beam, President, Vantage International at (717) 238-3939 or go to [www.vantage-inter.com](http://www.vantage-inter.com).

Leadership and business coaching is the latest addition to HANYS’ Workforce Solutions, a comprehensive array of advocacy, education, and marketplace solutions offered through HANYS and HSI to help improve the quality of the workforce and retain qualified health care workers.



*To learn more about leadership and business coaching and HANYS’ Workforce Solutions, contact Michael Ilnicki, Vice President and Chief of Operations, HANYS Solutions, Inc., at (518) 431-7829, at [milnicki@hanys.org](mailto:milnicki@hanys.org), or go to [www.ehanys.com/operational\\_efficiencies/executive\\_coaching.cfm](http://www.ehanys.com/operational_efficiencies/executive_coaching.cfm).*