DON'T BREAK DOWN SILOS – BRING THEM TOGETHER

Overview: Breaking down silos within an organization may seem like an act of destruction, but at its core, it involves encouraging dialog between teams in an effort to bring them together. An approach using understanding, communication, and measurement can help make this process a smooth one.

Breaking down silos! My mental image was always of someone placing a stick of dynamite at the foundation of a giant grain silo, and it exploding with the silo dramatically falling over, falling apart, with an explosion of grain and a giant cloud of dust enveloping the entire county.

The truth about breaking down silos in business is its pretty mundane. The fear of dramatic change can stop people from working outside of their team. Eliminating these silos only requires communicating with people outside of your silo. The best team of people for breaking down silos and communicating across the many parts of your company is the DevOps Automation Team. Many companies have landed on using a DevOps Center of Excellence (COE) model where a central team of automation experts goes and helps other parts of the company adopt a DevOps process and start implementing more agile processes.

Telling people you are going to break down their silo isn't going to help you achieve that goal. It sounds scary and invasive. But if you tell them you want to help them automate some of the work drudgery they face every day you are more likely to get people interested. Then you can introduce them to your DevOps Automation Team.

This Automation Team starts the conversation with how they can help:
• The Automation Team listens to the existing problems in the targeted silo.
• They start to understand the processes that are in place and the business reasons for the processes.
• They start to understand the bottlenecks in the process and propose automation solutions.
• They talk about how other parts of the company solved similar problems.

As the siloed team works with the Automation team an understanding develops:
• The siloed team starts to see that their unique problems are not really unique and that while their jargon may be different, their problems are the same. Other teams also experience slow hand-offs, manual testing/verification, manually gathering data for reporting, manually deploying software or data.
• Then the Automation team starts automating some time-consuming manual processes and shows the siloed team how to change from manual to automated processes.
• The siloed team realizes that they can improve their automated processes by working with other company teams.
• The siloed team starts talking with people outside of their silo.

There are three aspects to breaking down silos: Understanding, Communication, and Measurement.

Understanding: We see automation workshops where people spend a day identifying work processes within their silo and identify work that only one or two people even knew needed to be done. The result is new respect from people that "had no idea you had to do all that work." The ability to understand the process at a higher level is invaluable for teams outside of the silo. Now, other teams can understand why information is needed and why lead times are required. The workshop results provide a framework to understand the timelines for the process and where automation can play a role.

Communication: Automation facilitates communication; it integrates the different corporate factions into larger business processes that serve customers. You should think of the automation process as a way to bring teams together. Automation smooths the flow of processes and information across boundaries and expands understanding of the connections between teams. Let your DevOps Automation Team be the catalyst to transition your silos into integrated business teams.

Measurement: I recommend measuring progress for two reasons. 1. It helps you understand the next most important process improvement to make. 2. It's sometimes hard to see the silo is disappearing. How do you know the silo has disappeared? The automated processes move through the siloed team like any other part of the company. When the process fails or needs to be changed, the people outside of the silo easily talk with people inside of the silo to revamp or restart the process.

Slowly, as automation improves and more discussions are had, without realizing it the silo has disappeared. You generally only see localized improvements in the first weeks or months, but these add up to great improvements over a couple of years. Not the dramatic change with the explosion I always envisioned but it does have a dramatic effect on productivity. The silos are gone but the benefits of automation remain.