

## Reducing Conflict 3 Silo Thinking

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



A common form of conflict that we see in organizational life is called “Silo Thinking.” It is common because organizations of all types are made up of different groups of people. These groups are normally arranged so that the individual groups add up to get the work done most efficiently.

For example, in a manufacturing operation you might see a design group, a production group, a quality group, a finance group, and a management group. Each of these groups will have one person who is in charge of that group. By design, these groups take on the parochial viewpoints of their function. That polarization leads to the most common form of conflict in the workplace known as “Silo Thinking.”

### Childish Behavior

You would think that having different groups would create efficiency due to specialization, and you would be right, except it also encourages the groups to squabble like young children. Emotions run high when one group feels attacked because of the desires of the other group. People can resort to all kinds of methods to get their way. For example, it is common to have some name calling involved, especially if the opposing groups use email to communicate. People in the groups will become adamant that their way of viewing the situation is the only correct approach.

To spot silo thinking in groups that communicate mostly via email, look for “we versus they” wording in the notes. For example a note might read, “We wanted to postpone the introduction until all the bugs were worked out but they thought we were ready.”

### Simple Solution

The easy way to break the cycle of Silo Thinking is to get the groups to recognize they share a common goal at the next higher level. They are really not in opposition; they are on the same team. It is like the offense and defense groups on a football team. Both groups want to win the game, but they often view a situation from their perspective.

Reminding people that they are on the same team is effective, but sometimes you need to do more than that to break up the silo thinking. I found that swapping some members of one team for members of the other team is often helpful. When it becomes hard to tell which group is which, you have broken the cycle, and the silos no longer exist.

I once made a lot of progress by swapping the leader of one group with the leader of the other group. It was interesting to watch the walls of the silos melt before my eyes. It did not take long.

Another fix is to blur the lines of demarcation between the teams. For example, suppose you had a lot of conflict between a design team and a quality team. You could combine the quality group with the design group to make a blended group.

### **Free Bonus Video**

Here is the link to a short video on Silo Thinking:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mH5kJ8EKqPM>

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