



Working-as-One-Team: why can't we all row in the same direction?

by Bill Cropper – The Change Forum

Based on materials and experiences drawn from our team improvement clinics and participant Guides for Working Better Together © Bill Cropper 2002-15

"We just don't seem to work in very well together as a team! Everyone does their own thing. We're not on the same page about what's important. We don't share information or help each other out." Sound familiar? Why can't we all seem to row in the same direction?

I don't have all the answers. What I do know is that the ideal of *"Working-as-One-Team"* continues to be an article of faith we aspire to in most workplaces. Though it takes more than faith to get it actually happening. We all know what chaos, cost and lost opportunity it can cause if we can't find a way to row in the same direction together – when different team efforts are not just uncoordinated, but cut across, and even conflict and compete with each other. *Why does this continue to be a dilemma?*

The Silo Mentality



If you look at how we conventionally design work, you get a better idea of what Working-as-One-Team is all about and why we need to. Our thinking about how to best organise work is still redolent to a large degree of the 'production-line mind-set'. The guiding rule is still "divide it up" – an organising principle that still persists today in most workplaces.

There's nothing wrong with this, so long as everyone keeps the big picture process consistently and firmly in mind – and constantly remind ourselves we all work for the same team with the same overall purpose. The

"divide-it-up" principle has had massive efficiency benefits and it helps us carry out and complete epically complex projects, from movies to moon-launches.

But dividing can also be divisive. One of its unwanted by-products is the silo-mentality. It's a perennial pain-in-the-proverbial for most operations. It creates un-crossable boundaries and fault-lines between service units, work processes, functions and teams. Work can get so compartmentalised, we don't talk to each other, even if the quality of the final product or service depends on it.

- Locked into our own job boxes, we quickly lose sight of the big picture purpose (if we ever had one). We stop sharing information (if we ever started to), cross-boundary cooperation shrivels (if it ever existed) and collective accountability (if there ever was such a thing) turns into a fault-finding blame-game.

- As our teams become more isolated or distanced from each other, we grow more self-focused on our own plans, priorities, decisions, actions and results, less cognisant of what others do or need in the business so we all succeed and less predisposed to help each other.
- Boundaries between work areas become unscaleable brick walls with big “keep-out” signs painted on them to stop anyone trespassing on our territory. And all this becomes indelibly imprinted in terms of our thinking, behaviour and culture.

This is what happens when we develop a nasty case of silo-mentality. Work-as-One-Team says if you want to succeed you can't afford to operate like this. We need to row in the one direction, start helping out wherever it's needed, and stop making out we're too busy or our work is too important to help others.

Siloed Behaviour

Work-as-One-Team starts with challenging the excesses of the ‘divide it up’ mentality – breaking down artificial barriers between work areas, clambering over or perforating those previously impenetrable brick-walls. Often, these boundaries are ‘thinking’ or ‘attitude’, not just process or system ones. Think of your workplace. How often do you witness:



- People shrug disowningly, saying it's not their job or their issue?
- Mistakes accumulate stemming from lack of coordination or consideration?
- Too many turf wars, territorial disputes and blame games being played?
- Too many instances of lack of accountability or concerted action?
- People competing, hogging resources, working myopically or selfishly?
- Unwillingness to help others masked behind being busy or too important?

These are just some of the symptoms of siloed team behaviour. They're also major reasons why teams under-perform, pursue their own agendas at the expense of others, make costly mistakes, plan in isolation, compete rather than collaborate with each other, duplicate effort and squander resources.

Job protectionism, isolationism and competition as to whose project matters more, combined with a ‘not my job’ mentality, means we become short-sighted about what's needed, we don't *‘share the load’*, and some teams trip-up so much with this kind of silo-behaviour, they don't pull their weight at all.

Working-as-One-Team

Working-as-One-Team says you can't afford to operate in isolation if you want your whole outfit to succeed. Everyone in every team or work area needs to agree, then keep an eye on the big picture purpose. They need to know and value each other's roles and contributions and then do what's needed, whether it's technically our job or not, to help out others and cultivate those crucial cross-boundary 'co-operations' and synergies.



Working-as-One-Team bridges barriers and relieves symptoms of siloed behaviour like isolationism, job-protectionism, competition, blame and self-focus – all major team performance failure factors. It can shift heads and get you better results. But how and where do you start? We think there are 5 crucial Work-as-One-Team practices that leaders need to progressively implement with their teams.

- **Work out what matters:** sharing a vision of what we stand for, results that matter to us all, and how we all make a difference together. Everyone should know what the big picture is, the part they play in it, and most importantly, the part others play in it too.
- **Finding ways to work collectively:** how to share the workload, cultivate cohesion, cut competition and increase cross-boundary cooperation. It means firstly understanding what the workload really is that needs to be shared, then finding out what help people need when.
- **Tackling tough talks:** being frank about fronting up to one-team blocks and barriers and learning how to constructively confront 'fall-backs'. You need to do this to displace complacency, rattle the cage of our comfort zones and call things like collusion and self-interest that preserve and protect poor team work practices.
- **Let everyone know what's going on:** getting engagement by sharing information, ideas, learning, achievements and supports we need. One-team work relies on all-way communication – tapping into everyone's ideas and providing lots of opportunity to find out what's going on around us.
- **Sharing Responsibility:** setting targets, combining achievements, re-distributing decisions and being collectively accountable for results. If you work as one-team with a common focus and purpose, then it follows that everyone, regardless of their job or work area, will also share responsibility for successes and failures, mistakes and accomplishments, wins and losses.

Instead of individuals and teams working independently all the time, Work-as-1-Team encourages you to develop work arrangements that expand your areas of shared responsibility, as we work together more collectively on joint and cross-boundary support activities – including things like joint planning, decision-making, innovation, performance monitoring and information sharing.

As part of our *Working Better Together* package, [The Change Forum](#) runs a clinic aimed at equipping leaders and teams with practical tools to implement these five **Work-as-One-Team** operating principles – periodically run as a scheduled public program and also delivered in-house on request.

More on our *Working Better Together* programs and services on-line at www.thechangeforum.com.

- For a full run-down on our team-building approach, take a look at our [Working Better Together Prospectus](#)
- Consult our [Directory of Programs](#) for outlines of the many more programs we offer publicly and in-house
- Review our on-line [Course Calendar](#) for up-coming scheduled events in your area
- [Contact us](#) anytime to [enquire](#) about tailored team development, individual [coaching](#) and our general [consulting services](#)

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