"We are boxed in by the boundary conditions of our thinking."

**ALBERT EINSTEIN**

# BOUNDARIES OR **BARRIERS**?

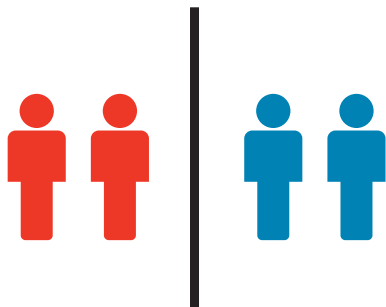By Bryan Adkins Ed.D., CEO, Denison Consulting

denison™

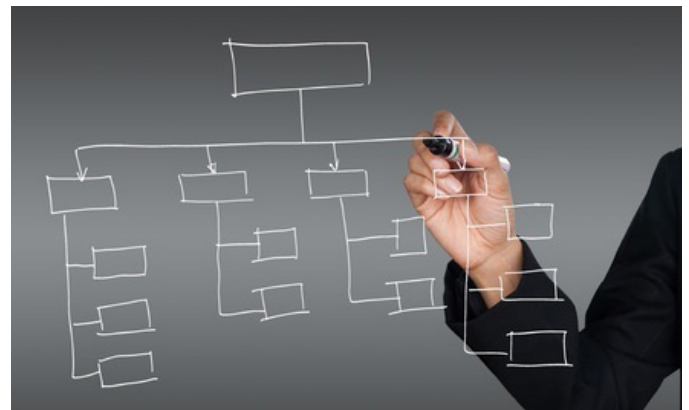# Silos, stovepipes, swim lanes and sandboxes.

What do they have in common? All are metaphors used every day in organizations around the globe to describe an environment where information is not shared and groups seem to behave in self-serving ways. In our effort to organize businesses and institutions we create boundaries that distinguish groups by functions, locations, business units, divisions and levels. The intent is to provide structure to complex operations, clarify decision rights and accountability and to consolidate areas of expertise. In theory it makes great sense.

In practice we are at risk of creating boundaries that become impenetrable. They become barriers to our ability to accomplish the strategies and goals that are critical to our success. Deliberately or unknowingly information is hoarded, resources are competed for, innovation is stifled, poor decisions are made and conflict is created. Too often it is the customer who suffers the consequences of our internal lack of coordination.

The signs are everywhere. More energy is spent trying to win internal battles than is spent on solving the external challenges in the marketplace. When problems occur or mistakes are made the first reaction is to ask 'who is to blame?' Redundancy is created when different groups are spending valuable organizational resources trying to solve problems and challenges, oblivious to the fact that others are struggling to solve the same issues. Bad decisions are made due to insufficient information. Mistrust builds as leaders and employees question what is going on elsewhere in the organization and phrases such as 'that's your job, not mine' and 'that's their problem, not ours' become part of the daily conversation.

## What can we do?
Must boundaries be impenetrable? The truth is that rarely are the boundaries the problem. Rather it is our thinking about those boundaries - the mindset and subsequent behaviors we adopt that make us believe the problem is a boundary problem.

In one recent client conversation, they kept referring to the 'left side' and 'right side' of the organization. They alluded to the problems that creates because one side is no longer 'allowed' to interact with the customer, sometimes resulting in feeling disconnected from the people they ultimately serve. When pushed on what is really going on one of the employees produced an organizational chart that quite literally showed how the organization was structured, not just hierarchically, but also left and right. What I saw was boxes on a chart, neatly organized to show functions and activities that are core to how the organization gets its work done. What they saw were boundaries that were not to be crossed – they saw barriers between customer facing and non-customer facing roles.

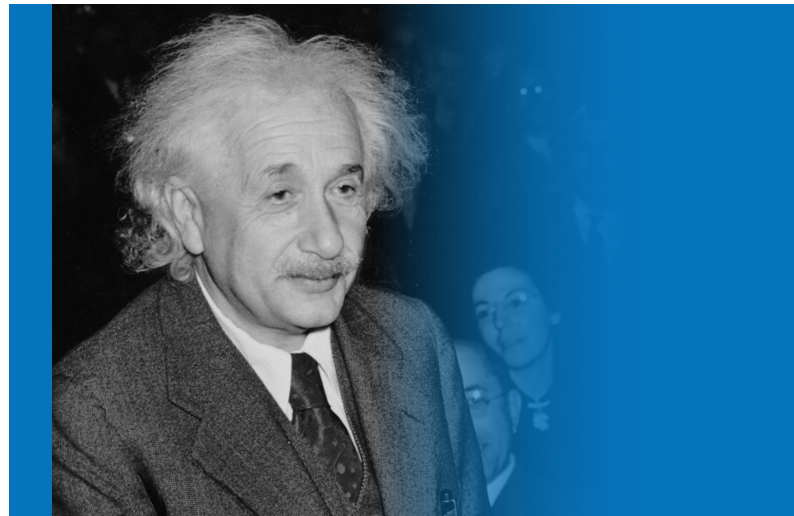# What can we do to make the structure **work for us** rather than against us?

How do we create permeable boundaries that provide the benefits of organizing complex activities while clarifying decision making rights and ensuring accountability for specific activities? The organizations that we have seen do this best employ a range of activities designed to enhance coordination and integration across boundaries.

## Here are 5 that you can try:

**1** Aligning to a common vision and strategy. Leaders and employees who are unclear about the bigger picture priorities and how everyone fits into achieving those priorities will focus on what is directly in front of them, resulting in behavior and action that appears to be self-serving when in fact they are simply doing what they know they will be held accountable for.

**2** Creating a transparent work environment. Increasing transparency can happen in a number of ways:

**A.** Publish goals (and progress towards those goals) from across the organization. When leaders and employees across boundaries have visibility into each other's goals they can offer support and quickly identify competing priorities so they can be openly discussed and resolved.

**B.** Capture regular feedback from colleagues outside of your own team. Tools such as Leadership 360's allow for input from various levels and functions. You can also seek out and include feedback from external team members when gathering data for performance reviews to demonstrate the importance of working effectively across boundaries.

**C.** Utilize common platforms throughout the organization for data collection and management. Working across teams is difficult when they are working with different data in a different format and possibly with a different meaning. With different departments reporting or making decisions on different versions of data, there is the potential for internal conflict. We often see this in acquisitions (another potential set of boundaries) where aligning systems becomes challenging at best with additional time and cost required to align and integrate the businesses.

**3** Engaging in Give/Get sessions. Give/Get discussions with other functions, locations, levels, etc. are an opportunity to share expectations and offer feedback regarding what each group is getting from each other and giving to each other. It fosters a better understanding of each other's needs and business issues, and assesses how well those needs are being met. It is also an opportunity to create Cross-team agreements regarding behaviors, practices, and habits that will help guide interactions between groups.

**4** Utilizing cross-organization project teams. Create cross-boundary teams to address larger and more complex projects that require or would benefit from coordination and broader expertise. Implementation of key strategies and complex initiatives such as an Innovation agenda is an example of an opportunity to align people from across an organization in an effort to develop new approaches to doing work and developing new products and services.

**5** Recognizing leaders and employees for cross-teaming. Develop ways to celebrate the accomplishments of cross-boundary team work. Recognize and reward those teams that develop innovative ideas or identify cost saving initiatives. As referred to above, ask leaders and colleagues to provide performance review input for employees outside of their direct responsibility and team to encourage feedback and input that goes beyond traditional team boundaries.



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Einstein was likely not referring to the boxes displayed on an organization chart, but the point is important. **If we allow organizational boundaries to become mental boundaries then we allow them to keep others out and box others in.**



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