Bridging silos: A proven method for effective business collaboration

By **Jean Egmon**

KELLOGG INITIATIVES **Architectures of Collaboration**

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY
Kellogg
School of Management

Bridging silos: A proven method for effective business collaboration

Our research suggests that it is possible to change mind-sets and behavior — and to solve what may seem to be intractable problems. A simple exercise that uncovers hidden motivations and mental pathways can help leaders to build bridges across organizational silos, create the ideal conditions for change, and successfully implement it.

By **Jean Egmon**

At some point in our careers, we all have a brilliant idea that hits a wall of resistance or falls off the table because others are unwilling to invest their own energy or resources. Whether we're dealing with an internal colleague, a value-chain partner, a regulator, or even a consumer who doesn't — or won't — grasp the value of our offering, we ask ourselves in frustration, "What's wrong with them? Why can't they see?"

Most often, our counterparts are simply focused on their own needs and goals — and they've already chosen a path for getting there. This decision leaves them stuck in a narrow channel of information, interests, and identity, often called a "silo." Individuals with a silo mentality tend to operate on fixed assumptions of how things are done and how value is created. Silo thinking is rampant in business; it's a perennial topic in management journals, and few executives would deny that it's a problem, particularly in cross-department relations. Yet this organizational barrier to efficiency, innovation, and growth persists, perhaps because we as leaders often become so fixated on the proverbial speck in our brother's eye that we miss the plank in our own.

To break through this barrier, develop a mind for growth, and successfully collaborate with and influence others, we must first reflect on our own thought processes and how that differs from others'. Take a step back and ask, "What motivates me? What motivates my counterparts? What paths do we expect will lead us to our goals? How are these motivations and envisaged paths different?" By starting with these questions of basic psychology, leaders can find win-win situations and build bridges among silos — namely, among people whose needs and goals differ.

In 1964, Dr. Victor Vroom published his expectancy theory of motivation, which explains that people follow a certain mental pathway when choosing among different courses of action. Vroom theorized that when people expend effort, big or small, they're always asking themselves, "Do I expect this will lead to a desired outcome associated with a reward?" By following this mental pathway, a business leader can map out an individual's or group's decision logic and better see issues from their perspectives.

Once leaders understand their constituents' goals, they must undertake an even more difficult task: convincing these constituents that a *different* path is a better alternative for getting what they want. If leaders can develop creative strategies that simultaneously meet the needs of and reward the multiple parties involved, they'll be well positioned to successfully implement their brilliant ideas and drive real growth for their organization.

Kellogg Action Lab Experience

The "Engagement Pathways Model" was introduced during a Kellogg Action Learning Experience (KALE) event on generating human, reputational, and economic health.

KALE is an innovative, crowd-sourcing model for solving complex problems facing business and society. Industry leaders partner with faculty in an intimate setting, weaving together scientific research and practical tools to solve tough-nut, high-impact problems. The result is simultaneous "wins" for member organizations and society.

Engagement Pathways Model: Not my way, not your way, but a new way

Over the course of a decade, we studied more than 60 organizations in an effort to determine why some innovative change initiatives succeed and why some fail. We uncovered consistent, key factors we call the 'Patterns of Profitability' — the presence of which may determine whether or not a leader will be successful in spurring the adoption of innovation.

Consider the story of a CEO struggling to pull his small technology manufacturing firm out of bankruptcy. He knew that to turn his company around, he would have to galvanize his employees and inspire them to innovate. His management team had experienced difficulty relating to this "rough and tumble" group — but then the CEO realized that his employees wore their scrappiness as a badge of honor. In fact, their grit was part of their core identity — and it was an identity to which he could relate. The CEO, who grew up on the South Side of Chicago, placed himself among them, saying that to survive they would have to be band together like "a pack of junkyard dogs." He used assertive language to define change initiatives and invented a "Junkyard Dog" prize — a toy dog awarded as a trophy for innovative ideas. Within months of this corporate cultural awakening, the company not only exited bankruptcy but also became an innovator and leading provider of technology products to the largest telecommunications companies in the world.

This CEO found a way to engage with his employees and change their behavior by using familiar metaphors and by physically embodying a characteristic that his employees respect. Moreover, the CEO inserted his own goal into their understanding of how to earn a reward. Indeed, our research revealed that every successful change effort begins by mapping out these "engagement pathways" — the expected route to reward — which differ from person to person, group to group. The pathways and the rewards themselves may be completely unexpected. In a sense, we have to work backward, starting with our target audience's true goal to understand their logic and what motivates them, then inserting our own goal into their logic.

To effectively wield this newfound understanding of constituents' engagement pathways, a leader must move beyond wanting everything to happen "my way" while also resisting the urge to succumb to the status quo or give in to others' entreaties to do things "their way." Rather, the leader must strive find an entirely different "new way" that takes into account the wants and needs of all individuals (who may still be thinking in silos) as well as the business system as a whole. This is how we find a new pathway to engagement — and how we change mind-sets and behavior.

The Triple Play: Creating wins across silos

Big changes cannot be implemented by rerouting just one engagement pathway. In our research, we found that every change-leadership success story involved a creative and strategic solution that altered *multiple* key parties' engagement pathways, redefining what they thought would lead to a reward. To be clear, this doesn't mean that the leaders rallied everyone around the same reward; each player or group had different needs, and the successful leader found a single solution to simultaneously meet them all. Of course, this is the ultimate achievement — for a business to thrive by making everyone feel involved and that their needs are being met.

In every successful change initiative we studied, business leaders achieved what we call a "Triple Play," or a creative, strategic approach — which could be a strategy, platform, product, service, or tactic — that simultaneously addressed the differing motivations of at least three key players. Our research also uncovered specific strategic actions — the Patterns of Profitability — that strong leaders take to effectively work across silos and tap into what motivates people with divergent goals.

1. USE NEW YET FAMILIAR LANGUAGE.

Change agents must bridge the divide between today and tomorrow with familiar metaphors, symbols, and rituals. By couching new terms in existing habits and language — as the manufacturing CEO did when he created the Junkyard Dog award — leaders make the new seem familiar, and change is thus less intimidating to constituents.

2. BE FLEXIBLE WITH ASSETS.

Those who control assets must be willing to invest enough in a new initiative to make it seem feasible and supported. These assets might be money, knowledge, people, or relationships that are free to move around and be invested in various ways anywhere in the organization to help it grow.

3. CONDUCT REALISTIC EXPERIMENTS, WHICH WE CALL "FRACTAL PROJECTS."

Instead of implementing a traditional pilot program, where new ideas are tested in isolation from real-world variability, leaders must design effective and realistic experiments to demonstrate repeatable success. The goal of these Fractal Projects is to embrace the full complexity of the greater organization, but at a manageable scale.

4. EMBODY THE CHANGE.

For people to adopt change and follow an alternative engagement pathway, they must see their leader intentionally making decisions that lead directly to their new goal. Changes to physical space, alterations to the organizational structure, or even a stuffed-dog trophy are all examples of ways to embody a desired outcome in concrete, observable terms.

In our experience, when any of these four strategic actions were disregarded, creating a Triple Play was impossible, change initiatives were more likely to fail, and an organization's culture reverted to its previous mind-sets and behavior.

WASTEWATCH: A CASE EXAMPLE OF FINDING PATHWAYS TO ENGAGEMENT AND EXECUTING A TRIPLE PLAY

While Zack Lowe was the Chief Security Officer of Waste Management, he identified a major security risk. Because waste haulers operate 24 hours a day, in alleys and on generally less-traveled paths, they see dangerous things on a regular basis. And Waste Management's drivers had started taking it upon themselves to intervene; they were first on the scene at traffic accidents, running into burning buildings, and breaking up burglaries.

"MY WAY"

Typically, an executive in Lowe's position would have a functional and silo-driven point of view. He might come to the conclusion that, though their efforts were admirable, the drivers' risky — perhaps even deadly — behavior must be stopped for their own sakes. Furthermore, company lawyers reminded Lowe at every turn that these incidents pose a significant legal risk.

A typical risk-mitigation strategy for the head of security at a large company might begin with meetings with regional supervisors to understand the extent of the risk and to counsel them on how, in turn, to instruct drivers to stop or change their behavior. This short-term prevention strategy doesn't take into account the drivers' satisfaction, their motivations, nor the long-term growth aspirations of the company as a whole. Had Lowe employed this strategy, here is how he might have assumed it would play out:

MY WAY

	Zack Lowe and the security department
Effort	Meet with supervisors to explain risks involved in driver behavior; implement a new policy forbidding driver intervention in high-risk situations.
Short-term result	Supervisors pass along new policy and instructions to drivers.
Long-term outcome	Drivers change their behavior and stay completely out of dangerous situations.
Reward	Security risk is mitigated, losses prevented, and the rest of the organization approves — and Lowe has helped keep his employees safe.

"THEIR WAY"

However, Lowe is far from typical, and he knew that it's rare for "my way" interventions to be simply adopted. In this case, Lowe heard from supervisors that they didn't have the resources to invest in the proposed additional training. The margins were already tight, and supervisors were looking for ways to cut costs, boost sales, and improve the bottom line. This kind of "extra" safety and compliance training would cost time and money, and management was hesitant to buy in. It felt to them like a problem for the legal department or corporate security, not operations.

Lowe also heard time and again that the drivers took great pride in their ability to step in and help those in need. He learned that the drivers were motivated by their desire to make a difference in their communities; they felt a strong sense of achievement when they were able to help and thus may have reacted badly to being told to walk away. Lowe's "my way" policy would likely have led to disengaged workers. However, if Lowe simply accepted the status quo of the business managers or the drivers and let things go on their way, this scenario might have played out:

THEIR WAY

	Drivers	Operations
Effort	Maintain the status quo and continue helping community members in need.	Provide minimal training; simply instruct drivers to stop engaging in dangerous situations.
Short-term result	Driver behavior is unchanged.	Legal and security departments get off operations' backs; drivers are unhappy with the mandate that stifles their natural motivation.
Long-term outcome	Though drivers feel good about preventing bad things from happening, over time the risk increases that 1) someone will get hurt, 2) someone will sue the company, and 3) the reputation of the company will be damaged.	Operations remains unaware of the opportunity to better tap into what motivates the drivers as well as boost the company's profile in the community; the situation might even create animosity among operations and shared services like security and legal, as well as with the drivers who want the company to "stay out of their business."
Reward	Drivers are praised for heroism; they're happy to play an important role in their communities…until something goes wrong.	Mitigate risk with the minimal amount of compliance possible, with no more added costs…until something goes wrong.

"A NEW WAY"

Lowe saw a way to address the concerns of all the constituents involved and simultaneously improve the business. In our parlance, he created a Triple Play. Lowe designed WasteWatch, a new branded program available to Waste Management drivers, where local police and fire officials train drivers on how to call for help and to more safely intervene in potentially dangerous situations.

To attain managerial buy-in, Lowe approached operations and explained drivers' motivation to help their communities as well as how the new program could raise the profile of the company and benefit the community. He used his own budget to initially pay for the training as well as donuts and WasteWatch hats for the drivers who participated. Drivers who completed the course and passed a test got a program certification, and they signed waivers that testified they were trained on how to conduct themselves safely, mitigating company liability.

The program was a hit. Hundreds of drivers signed up, were more engaged at work, and felt a strong sense of pride: they weren't stopped from helping people, they were taught how to do it more effectively and safely. Furthermore, local media outlets all over the country picked up the story and reported on how Waste Management drivers are assets to the community. Community leaders now see Waste Management as a caring community partner, which drives business development. The company's reputation has been enhanced, they get more contracts, and revenue has increased. Here's how Lowe's Triple Play unfolded:

A NEW WAY

	Lowe and the security department	Drivers	Operations	Community
Effort	Create a branded program where security initially foots the bill, designs and provides training.	Complete WasteWatch training.	Allow security and the community to train their drivers.	Local police and fire commit resources to assist with training.
Short-term result	Drivers receive proper training to call for help and stay safe in dangerous situations.	Become WasteWatch certified; pleased with their ability to continue helping those in need.	Enjoys low-cost training, community involvement, and media coverage.	Safety services benefit from extra eyes and ears on the ground; community leaders praise company on the benefits of the program.
Long-term outcome	Better-informed drivers stay safer.	Enhanced personal safety; recognition for their efforts from the company and the public.	The program attracts more contracts and helps drive business development.	Community leaders, particularly from police and fire departments, gain a valued and trusted partner.
Reward	The company's security risk is mitigated and losses prevented; the security department is seen as a contributor to business growth.	Program motivates drivers, increases company loyalty, and creates greater sense of community.	Program creates revenue and reputational growth; company is now considered a hands-on, trusted, contributing member of the community.	Community experiences enhanced safety and feeling of partnership with the company.

Originally, Lowe was interested in preventing tragedy and minimizing risks to his people; he could have chosen his own way and risked upsetting the drivers and the commercial side of the business. But by figuring out and acting upon what motivated his colleagues, he was able to change everyone's engagement pathways — his own included.

TAKE-AWAY

The Patterns of Profitability checklist and Engagement Pathways Model are simple but powerful tools to help leaders understand and create the ideal conditions for change. Leaders who use these exercises to move beyond their own silo thinking can realize truly valuable collaboration — changing mind-sets and behavior, including their own, and achieving real growth.

__Jean Egmon__ is a clinical professor of management and the Director of Collaborative Practices for Kellogg's Architectures of Collaboration Initiative. She leads the translation of ideas and research on collaboration and applying it to solve many types of business challenges, such as working across silos, designing successful viral marketing, crafting successful strategic partnerships, crowd sourcing, and driving adoption of change and innovation. Dr. Egmon also convenes the Kellogg Action Lab Experiences (KALEs) that bring executives from diverse industries together in an intimate and innovative learning environment, with the goal of breaking through the barriers of growth using what they learn from Kellogg faculty and their cutting-edge research as well as what they learn from each other.

Dr. Egmon is also the founder and CEO of Third Angle, Inc., where she helps companies to uncover and unleash the growth potential in their businesses. Through Third Angle, she leads a network of executives and academics representing diverse industries and disciplines in a joint approach, connecting intelligence, motivations, and assets across diverse players in business systems. Third Angle facilitates the creation and implementation of strategies and innovations that create value for multiple stakeholders at once, which, for example, might allow access to new markets, integrate projects across silos to speed innovation, or facilitate successful mergers and strategic alliances.

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Kellogg
School of Management

Kellogg School of Management
Northwestern University
2001 Sheridan Road
Evanston, IL 60208

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY