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# Building bridges

*Meet with other departments to clarify expectations*

## Question:

**“Employees in the customer service department I supervise are catching flak from other departments for issues the other departments create. Because we’re customer service, we get to do “damage control” with the customers. The other departments don’t seem to appreciate the binds they sometimes put us in. My employees are frustrated by having to clean up the messes the other departments create. Last week, a nasty e-mail made its way through the office in which blame was handed out by another department. They tried to throw one of our CSRs under the bus. I called a meeting with my team and tried to calm things down. The problem is, trust has been lost with the other department. I can’t say I blame my employees for feeling defensive and even angry. I’m concerned that this situation will continue to spiral out of control unless I do something. Do you have any advice?”**

## Answer:

You did the right thing by holding a meeting with your team. You need to help your team get a hold of this situation and change the way it interacts with other work areas. In this column, I will outline some steps to clarify expectations moving forward.

To begin, let me reference the “Three Ps” model of organization development that longstanding readers will immediately recognize. In brief, the model suggests that to encourage peak performance, leaders must encourage linking and aligning at the organization-wide, team or work area, and individual levels with regard to purpose (i.e., why?), partnership (with whom?), and process (how?) considerations.

The situation you describe appears to involve elements that touch upon both the partnership and process variables. My bet is that assumptions are being made about how these practices are pursued. Your work area assumes this or that about the other work areas. The other work areas assume this or that about your work area. Misperceptions pervade and feelings run high.

For example, you probably have spent

time clarifying work processes and outlining guidelines for expected behavior when interacting with customers. The other work areas probably have done the same. A couple of key questions emerge: (1) To what extent do you understand the processes of the other work areas and the customers with whom they interact? (2)

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To what extent do the other work areas understand your work processes and the customers with whom you interact? (3) If the ultimate goal is to delight or excite the end user (the external customer), to what extent are the steps and exchanges that happen along the way inside the company (internal customer service) ensuring that that end is achieved each and every time?

What am I driving at? There seems to be a lot of finger-pointing going on. You are starting to play the blame game in earnest. It’s always a warning signal to me when I hear about vitriolic e-mails being passed around. It’s time to circle the wagons and sort things through. To be very specific, it is time to focus on the interdependency that exists between work areas, clarify expectations, and chart a collaborative approach going forward.

How is such an activity pursued? The steps below comprise a framework that might be applicable to your situation.

### Step one: meetings with leaders

Schedule a series of one-on-one meetings with the leaders of each work area

with which relations are strained. Ask the other leaders if they feel that relations between the work areas can be improved. Ask if they are willing to search for mechanisms or procedures that may improve interdepartmental relations. If agreement is obtained that positive progress can be made, then proceed to step two. If no agreement can be obtained, then seek as-

sistance for mediating the conflict.

## Step two: generating lists

Work with your team to generate two lists of items: (1a) their thoughts, attitudes, feelings, and perceptions of the other work area, (1b) their ideas about what the other work area dislikes about your work area, (2a) their understanding of the work process(es) of the other work area, and (2b) their ideas about what the other work understands about the work process(es) of your work area. Encourage the leaders of the other work area to do the same exercise regarding your team. Repeat the process for each work area where relations are strained.

## Step three: sharing lists

Set a separate meeting with each of the other work areas. Come together and share the information on the lists. Avoid discussing the items. The idea here is to listen non-critically. This is an opportunity to hear how the other work areas view your work area.

## Step four: discussion and analysis

This step involves scrutinizing the items that were shared in the previous step. Separately, each work area should discuss what they have learned about themselves and the other work area. They should also make a list of priority issues that still need to be addressed by the two work areas.

## Step five: synthesis and action planning

In this step, the two work areas come back together and share the lists with each other. After comparing the lists, they then make one list containing the issues and problems that should be resolved. They set

priorities on the items in terms of importance and immediacy. They jointly generate action steps for resolving the issues and assign responsibilities for the actions.

What do you think of the approach? Perhaps you are thinking, "Wow, this seems like a lot of effort. How can we afford to spend that much time away from work?"

If you are inclined to think in these terms, my question to you is, "How's it going right now? How can you afford to let things continue as they are?"

Perhaps the assertive nature of the exercise seems intimidating. Why do you have to overtly seek out the other work areas, aren't they the ones who are making things difficult? While it might be easier in the short term to walk around issues rather than confront them head-on, it's pretty rare for things to just get better. That's wishful thinking. No, it's more effective to act in concert with the saying, "You have to put the fish on the table."

By taking the proactive steps I outline above, work processes will be clarified and collaborative opportunities will be identified. You will be helping yourselves by helping your internal customers. In essence, you will be getting your own house in order and encouraging others to do the same. Most importantly, you will be doing so in concert with the other work areas. This will reinforce the fact that you both play for the same team.

You just might find that by emphasizing this over time, stronger relationships with your external customers will be realized.

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