"Cross-Functional" or "Dysfunctional"?

5 Keys to Getting Those Big Initiatives Right

Big organizations breed cross-functional initiatives like overripe bananas breed fruit flies. And that's a good thing because when these initiatives work, they propel an organization forward. That's because they draw from different parts of the organization, with different expertise, and different interests at stake, and then focus on solving a single, important problem.

But they don't always work. In fact, a cross-functional initiative can easily become a dysfunctional one, propelling the organization nowhere. Or worse.

Here are four common types of dysfunctional initiatives, plus their antidotes.

Zombies. By definition, "initiatives" have a beginning and an end. They may last a few months or even a few years. Then they're over. But some initiatives become un-dead: lifeless, aimless, and *endless*, sucking morale and money but giving nothing back, ever.

> **Antidote**: Forgetting to *define a home run up front* will zombie-ize any initiative. If no one has answered the question, "What's the point?" then the initiative is pointless – and endless. In one study we conducted, we found *unclear goals* to be the single biggest contributor to initiative failure.
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> So, before you begin planning, staffing, stakeholdering, or anything else, ask yourself, "How, exactly, will things be different if we succeed?" And, don't cheat by referencing the initiative itself. For example, the point of an ERP initiative is not to install ERP software.

That's circular. It will be something else. But if you can't describe success at the end, there will be neither success nor an end.

Antidote: Only after you have clear goals can you have clear roles, which is the other cure for zombie-ism. People need to know what's expected of them: What are their deliverables? With whom will they work, and on what? When do they need to kick into gear, and when should they wait on someone else?

Otherwise, everyone wanders around, confused, having the same meetings over and over again, and bumping into each other . . . like zombies.

Unguided missiles. Unlike zombies, unguided missiles do actually hit a target. Unfortunately, it's the wrong target. Here's what happens.

The senior executive launching the initiative chats with the initiative's team leader. They talk in broad, "strategic" (i.e., sketchy) terms, and then they go their separate ways. Afterward, the executive and the team leader don't talk much – perhaps only enough to agree that "everything is green."

Boy, are they in for a shock.

Throughout the work, the executive reflects on the initiative, staying in touch with shifting priorities or other context. He may discuss it with peers. He does all this naturally, and it naturally refines his thinking.

Even hard-won insights soon seem plain and obvious.

Meanwhile, down in initiative-land, the team leader and his gang sink into their work – and form *their* ideas of what the initiative is all about, clarifying goals, roles, and tactics, which may shift as they adapt to the reality of the work.

In this scenario, mis-targeted missiles are inevitable. At the end of the initiative, the only thing shared by the executive and the team is exasperation.

Antidote: The sponsoring executive and the team leader need to talk specifics. They need to agree on the verifiable *point of the project* (as we suggested a moment ago), and then they need to *keep talking* throughout the life of the initiative. Here's the surprising thing: they

don't actually need to spend much time in conversation; they just need to do it often.

We like the way one savvy US Navy admiral says it: Communication early and often "ensures we don't build the perfect ladder that's leaning against the wrong wall."

Cesspools. Many cross-functional initiatives aim to execute strategy, or otherwise accomplish things that matter to the organization. So it's always odd when managers place these weighty initiatives in the hands of lightweight team members, people who won't be missed back at their desks. What should be a talent pool isn't one. It's a cesspool of benchwarmers and neophytes.

> **Antidote:** Obviously, the antidote here is to put the right people on the initiative. Why don't people do that? Often the problem here can be traced back to the problem we described earlier: When the "return" part of ROI is undefined, then the "investment" part is hard to swallow, especially when you're investing precious talent. First, define "the win" (sound familiar?); then it's much easier to select the best people and invest their time.

Boneless Chickens. Cartoonist Gary Larson once drew a picture of a boneless chicken ranch, with chickens draped like wet rags all over the scene. Now, reimagine those chickens as members of cross-functional initiatives – good-looking chickens, all, but without a leg of authority to stand on.

See, a cross-functional initiative is an actual organization. Just like a department or a division. The fact that it is only temporary does not lessen the participants' need for ordinary authorities. In fact, it heightens the need. Lack of authority will leave them all flopping around, but getting nowhere.

> **Antidote:** If the lead is accountable for the outcome of the initiative (she *is*, right?), then she needs managerial authorities commensurate with her accountability, just as though she were running a department. (We've spelled out those authorities elsewhere[1].

> Likewise, initiative team members need to be able to speak on behalf of their departments – if that's what's required of their contributions. They must not be relegated to note-taking and permission-asking.

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[1] http://www.elg.net/accountability-authority-drive-employees-crazy/

The executive launching the initiative should openly spell out who has what authorities. *People cannot self-anoint.* When a peer claims, "Trust me, I'm in charge," it never works.

The Über Antidote is Project Management.

You can't buy many books on "initiative management." But, that isn't what this topic is really called. It's called "project management," and there is material and education aplenty on that topic – some of which on our web site[2]. (Okay, that was blatant self-promotion.)

But the point is, all this stuff has been figured out. People get degrees in it. People get certified in it.

Here's what's funny, though. Organizations that have lots of good project managers (as they do in construction, technology, and many other fields) often forget that cross-functional initiatives are just projects. And so, their cross-functional initiatives fizzle out as often as everybody else's.

Our advice? If you're already using project management to solve certain kinds of problems, you might think about where else you can use it (such as cross-functional initiatives). "Re-use the code!" as programmers like to say.

If you haven't introduced this discipline into your organization, you should. It might be one of the more strategic investments you ever make.

Related reading:
Can a person really have two managers? See http://bit.ly/NgEQYu

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[2] Books http://www.elg.net/shop/ and training http://www.elg.net/products-services/