

# Foxholes, not Silos

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Science of Team Science, 16 May 2019

“it’s bad to treat  
disciplines as separate  
silos”

Is a “silo” really a good  
metaphor for an  
academic discipline?

# Our use of “silos”

(as far as I can tell) From Phil Ensor, “organization development consultant” in 1988 for the Association for *Manufacturing* Excellence

## The Functional Silo Syndrome

AME Target, p. 16, 1988

Phil S. Ensor

**Editor's comment:** Several months ago Phil Ensor coined a phrase, “functional silo syndrome.” It caught on, and AME has a study group

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## Organizational Renewal— Tearing Down the Functional Silos

AME Study Group on Functional  
Organization

AEM Target, pp 4–16, 1988

**S**ome say that the typical U.S. corporation never was competitive. Tom Peters, co-author of *In Search of Excellence*, says that American dominance of the world's markets during the three decades

functional silo syndrome,” as AME has chosen to label it.

**What is the Functional Silo Syndrome?**

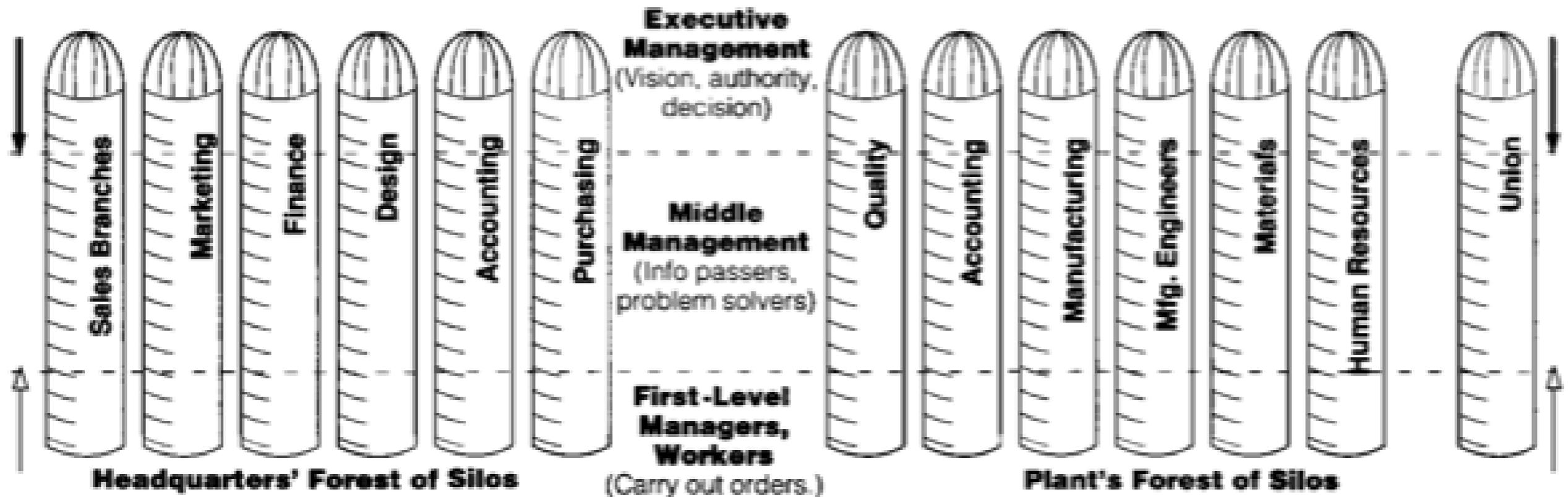
The classic functions of a man-

**Why Is the Functional Silo a Serious Problem?**

Bureaucracies have been around a long time. Their well-known frustrations have been the subject of several generations of

# Key AEM image

## The Functional Silo Syndrome



Note that the paths of energy and activity flow mainly from the top down. There is very little bottom-up feedback (participation) and inter-functional communication is difficult. The union is even further isolated.

# Good metaphors should

- Say what we want them to say
- Not say what we don't want them to say
- Work as proxies: thinking about the metaphor leads to relevant insight

What we are trying to say:  
“Don’t stop talking to each  
other”

In defense of (actual)  
silos

# Actual silos...

Protect your grain from rot and pests

Separate corn, wheat, barley, etc.

Help farmers get their product to market



# Actual silos...

Can be very pretty

Evoke fond memories (at least in old folk)



# Actual silos...

Keep your round barn from falling down



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The good things about silos  
remind me of  
good things about  
academic disciplines

# Academic disciplines

- Conserve civilization
- Help Academics focus
- Are convenient management units
- Can strengthen each other (Biology and Philosophy, for example)
- Are “places” where specialists can share what is beautiful about their “specialty”
- Evoke fond, fond memories in foolish, fond old academics

# The “silos” metaphor doesn’t do what we want it to

- It implies that we are, or that we produce, commodities
- It makes us forget/devalue the good things about having separate disciplines
- It is sterile: is the solution to destroy academic “silos”?

Let's think carefully  
about our metaphors

# Is this really what we want?



What you know

Your colleagues

Your papers, books,  
theorems, paintings,  
arias, samples, ...

“Foxholes” is a better  
metaphor

# “Don’t stay in your foxholes” means

- Don’t stop talking to each other
- We’re all in this together
- Don’t become “entrenched” (create knowledge)
- Advance together when it’s appropriate (be “interdisciplinary”)
- Dig new foxholes when appropriate (protecting new disciplines)

# Some pushback

- I am not happy with the militarism of “foxholes” and the violence of an implied war
- I do not like the rigid administrative hierarchy this implies
- I recognize that the consequences of failing in a foxhole are far worse than those of failing in academia

Maybe gardens would be a better metaphor?

# Acknowledgements

- Kurt Queller, University of Idaho, English

Discussion?

# Definitions

- *Originally*: a hole in the ground for storing grain, manure, or provisions (hence “silage”; from Greek σιρòσ)
- *19th century, OED*: a container, sometimes cylindrical (first used 1873)
- *1958, OED*: A place to keep your nuclear missiles
- *1988: Management*: A separate area of managerial responsibility
- *Something you don't want to turn your discipline into*

# What is a silo?



# How many thought of this?



# Or one of these?



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# How about this?



# I know...

