



# CROSSING THE DIVIDE

by **Michael Solender & Anna Rogers**

**Cross-functional work teams develop deeper understanding of p**

## DIVIDE AND CONQUER.

**THIS BUSINESS AXIOM** ADVOCATES FOCUSING EXPERTISE IN NARROW NICHEs TO BEST ATTACK ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES. BUT IS IT THE RIGHT WAY TO GO?

Many businesses choose to examine their processes collaboratively, involving each organizational function that contributes to its end goals. With rapidly shifting market conditions, technological advances and multi-generational, multi-disciplined workforces, cross-functional teams can yield spot-on results for the client as well as smoother internal operations.

process and allow for a holistic approach to supporting customers.





“Metaphorically, cross-functional teams are like building a home,” explains Brandon Gabriel, Executive Vice President of Business Development at Midnight Oil Agency in Burbank, California. “Each member has a different role in building the home. Strategists and architects are vital, but that doesn’t mean the guys laying the drywall, tile, and roof shingles aren’t important. Midnight Oil strives to make sure that regardless of your role, you are all equally important to the success of the customer’s request.”

By embracing cross-functional teams, Midnight Oil is seeing better results unfold within their organization and in the products and services delivered to their clients. Scott Blaylock, Vice President of Account Services, focuses specifically on the linkage between client strategy and bringing together internal divisions to create the right product for the client.

“We used to have a very linear process that involved hand-off from one team to the next,” Blaylock says. “We were missing out on a holistic strategy that engaged all players at the onset of a project.”

Blaylock’s goal is to understand the key values that team members bring to the table, loop them in early on, and develop a pricing and project strategy from the beginning, just like building a solid home, on time and within budget.

“After all, if the framer doesn’t frame the home right, the electrician can’t do his job,” Blaylock notes.

But this holistic approach is not without its challenges. As Blaylock explains, “The elephant in the room is answering the tough question: how do you link between teams horizontally and processes vertically?”

“This takes a really good commitment not only from the top, but from team leaders that create a tribal influence that sustains itself,” according to Gabriel. This means identifying key influencers who will help create that “win” for the customer, and giving them credit.

A cross-functional team approach is not a sales force which gets a task, dumps it into a system with a due date and just waits for the project to pop out. It’s also not a task moving

from silo to silo until completion. For Blaylock and his teams at Midnight Oil, “it is agile, moving kind of amoeba-like to attack. And it leads to a structure that can be gray with a lot of clarification needed around role functions, asking the question: ‘What do you do now and what should you be doing?’”

## The “Idea to Application” Divide

What are some practical ways to ensure a company’s “amoeba-like” cross-functional teams are effective and not getting off-track from the initial strategy that aligned with the customer’s goals?

Paul DeYoung is a business process improvement consultant and leadership coach who helps companies create a strategy for effective cross-functional teams.

Key components for successful cross-functional work teams include:

- Role definition — “It’s critical to identify who does what and where accountabilities lie in the process,” says DeYoung. “It’s all about handoffs; that’s where things always break down. Mapping people to each step in the process can eliminate the ‘I thought you were responsible for this’ mindset.”
- Singular accountability — “Overall accountability for the entirety of the process and authority for intervention is also a vital component to successful cross-function teams,” according to DeYoung. “Leadership and final process oversight is essential for conflict resolution. If things break down, one entity or individual needs the authority to remove obstacles.”
- Clear expectations — Closely related to role definition are outcomes, check points and success measures, which need to be clearly established and agreed upon to evaluate success. “When organizations put resources into establishing cross functional work teams,” states DeYoung, “they need to clearly define what outcomes they expect. Customer satisfaction, speed to market, cost savings, and employee retention are examples of outcome expectations.”
- Personal and organizational goal alignment — Companies need to be wary of creating an environment where department or individual goals conflict with the overall endgame of the organization.

“Members of Loyalist Teams subordinate their personal agendas for the greater organizational goal,” says Linda Adams, co-author of *The Loyalist Team: How Trust, Candor, and Authenticity Create Great Organizations*. The book defines a Loyalist Team as “One whose members ensure each other’s success and operate with absolute candor valuing loyalty and authenticity to deliver results, create a healthy work environment, and help companies succeed.” Adams says, “Competition among functions would not be of value in a Loyalist team.” They instead would be focused on larger goals aligning values and incentives as such.

Alignment of individual, department and organizational goals can be a difficult challenge for established organizations to overcome. Often procedures and processes are set in place to maximize department efficiencies rather than organizational efficiencies. Human Resources intervention in developing incentive, performance management and talent management programs can be critical in emphasizing the

commitment to broad organizational goals.

“Standard HR practices need to reflect and underscore these values,” says Adams.

### The “Customer to Operations” Divide

Many organizations find tremendous benefit in having team members from various functions shadow customer service personnel and gain direct input from end users about their experience with products or services the organization provides.

Shoe seller extraordinaire Zappos has a legendary customer service organization. Even though only five percent of their sales occurs via phone orders, company officials recognized that a high percentage of their customers reach out through the call center at some point in their relationship with the retailer.

The company views each of these touch points as an opportunity to build the brand and gain valuable information as to what is on its customer’s minds. The company routinely has personnel from across all functions take a seat in the call

center (after company training of course). This is not only so they can interface directly with the end customer, but so they can debrief with their respective departments and across the entire enterprise in identifying trends, opportunities, and concerns. It also provides great insight in determining ways to improve the customer experience, the company’s competitive advantage, and, ultimately, its bottom line.

Zappos recognizes how input on the back end of a business process can inform at the innovation stages. Venture capitalists and Kleiner Perkins partners Ted Schlein and Creighton Hicks shared their thoughts on cross-functional customer service teams in a recent Desk.com blog post when they noted, “Understanding how users interact with your product is essential to successful product development. It benefits not only design and production, but also marketing, selling and support.”

Expertise has always existed across the entire organization. It remains up to savvy management teams to stretch this knowledge beyond narrow pockets and into seamless cross-functional teams, a proven approach to improving internal function and enhancing customer satisfaction.

