



The Silo Plague

How a deadlocked leadership team broke through.

By Christian Rook

A few years ago, I was brought in to lead a “difficult” company out of a stagnating situation. The client was a private equity firm whose expectations about the company’s potential had been far more optimistic at the time of acquisition.

There was no immediate threat of bankruptcy. No buildings were burning down. But it didn’t take long for me to realize why nothing seemed to move forward in this company.

And it wasn’t for lack of substance. The products worked – some had even shaped their market in the past. Customers were still loyal, at least for now, protected by long-term exclusivity contracts. And competence wasn’t the issue either. Every department was staffed with skilled professionals.

Still—something was blocking this company.

The departments operated in parallel, not in sync. Often, they worked in outright opposition.

Finger-pointing had become a daily ritual. The tension between Sales, R&D, and Production was almost hostile.

Sales would say: *“The engineers have no clue what the customer actually needs—they only build what’s technically possible.”*

R&D would shoot back: *“They’re selling things that don’t even exist yet. At prices we can’t deliver. The BOM alone is higher than the customer quote.”*

Production? They just shook their heads whenever a last-minute change crashed into their carefully laid-out supply chain and schedules.

In my first weeks, I tried everything you’d expect: one-on-one meetings, workshops, charts, numbers.

Nothing moved.

Then, a coach friend shared a line that stuck with me:



“If you want them to move, they have to feel what you want—before they understand it.”

It sounded a bit esoteric at first. But I realized what was missing: not data, but experience. Not analysis, but emotion. Understanding through doing. Through feeling. Through struggle.

The Plan

I organized a two-day offsite for the leadership teams from Sales, Engineering, and Production. No PowerPoint marathons. No abstract models. Just flipcharts, coffee, and a forest outside the door.

I stood up, looked around—and felt it immediately: this would be a pivotal day.

“You’re not working in your own departments today,” I began.

Skeptical glances.

“For this exercise, we’ll switch roles: Sales will handle production planning. Production will define a go-to-market strategy. And Engineering will develop the market entry concept.”

"Wait... what?" Martin Semmler from Production leaned back and folded his arms.

Klaus Peters from Sales smirked without looking up from his phone: *"Easy. Let's see how the others mess it up."*

Sarah Suvali from R&D asked dryly, *"Are we at least getting some data?"*

I smiled. *"Very little. Intentionally."*

Silence. Then—deep breath. Game on.

"You've got one hour. Then you'll present your concepts."

The Start

The teams spread out into the corners of the room. Flipcharts went up. Pens were sorted. You could see immediately who stepped into a leadership role.

Klaus dove right in: *"Let's do this properly. No whining. No excuses."*

Someone chuckled. Someone else clapped.

Martin's team worked more methodically: *"If this is for the customer, we need clarity. No marketing fluff."*

Sarah said nothing at first, just flipped through the sparse handouts. Her team waited silently. Then she murmured: *"Go-to-market without a market? Feels like blindfolded darts."*

The Cracks Begin to Show

After about 20 minutes, the energy shifted. First it got louder. Then quieter. Then tense.

"How many units per week can Plant 1 produce?" someone in the Sales group asked.

"How would I know?" Klaus snapped. *"That's what Production always calculates."*

Martin looked at his notes: *"Customer value'... What is that even supposed to be? Can't we just say 'good quality'?"*

"We have no pricing, no competition, no target audience," Sarah said finally. *"This isn't strategy. It's crystal ball reading."*

The Quiet Exchange

Around the 30-minute mark, people started wandering. Not officially. Just subtle movement toward the coffee machine—or more precisely, toward the other team's flipcharts.

"Hey, do you have anything on material availability?" someone from Sales asked Production.

"Depends," came the reply, eyebrow raised. *"For what exactly?"*

Sarah leaned over to a teammate. *"I'll ask Sales. Otherwise we're just spinning in circles here."*

It was bizarre. In a system built on separation, a genuine need for exchange emerged. Not out of goodwill. Out of necessity.

The Presentations

An hour later, three flipcharts stood in front of the group. No one looked particularly proud. Everyone just wanted it over with.

Production went first: *"Our customer value is high stability, predictable processes, maximum efficiency."*

Sales snorted. *"That sounds like nonsense to any customer."*

Then R&D: *"Our market strategy is based on technical differentiation. But we lack data. We assume modularity might be an advantage."*

Then Klaus stepped up, looking at his sketch of a production line with three stations and buffer zones. He paused and said:

"Honestly—I have no idea what I'm doing here. I don't even know if this makes sense."

Martin nodded. *"We were in over our heads too. That's why the experts need to be involved."* He turned to Sales: *"You guys are the key. Nothing works without you."*

Then came a moment of stillness. Quiet nods. No punchlines. Just truth.

The Mirror

The coach stood up slowly. He had observed the entire session silently. No feedback. No corrections. Now, he looked around. Waited.

Then said one sentence—calm, almost casual:

"Welcome to your company."

No one replied. But something shifted. A glance. A nod. A deep exhale. Small. But real.

Afterwards

It's not that everything changed overnight. But the tone of the afternoon conversations was different.

Questions were asked more quietly.

Answers weren't immediately defended.

Klaus—the same sales director who had bragged about how easy production planning would be—turned to Martin:

"How often does it blow up in your face when we sell stuff that screws up your whole schedule?"

Sarah explained what happens when specs come in too late—not in technical jargon, but in plain language and numbers people could feel.

No Hollywood ending. But a beginning.

What I Learned

I came in wanting to lead with numbers. With clarity. With structure.

But I had to learn that real change doesn't start with others.

It starts the moment **you** see yourself—clearly. And that only happens when you **feel** something that sticks.

Not through analysis. Not through appeals.

But through an experience that won't let go.

True understanding begins where we catch ourselves in a mistake—not others.

And that's where transformation begins.

That's when I sat down with them and told this story:

The Elephant in the Dark Room

A king once brought a mighty elephant into a large, windowless chamber.

Then he invited several wise men into the room—but none were allowed a torch or lantern. It was pitch dark.

Each of them was allowed to touch the elephant to determine what was inside.

One grabbed the trunk and said, *"It's a giant snake."*

Another touched a leg: *"No, it's a solid tree trunk."*

The third felt the ear: *"You're both wrong—it's a huge leaf or maybe a fan."*

Another reached the tail: *"Nonsense. It's a rope. I can feel it clearly."*

Each man touched a part of the truth—but none saw the whole.

This ancient story—rooted in Persian, Sufi, and Buddhist tradition—reminds us how limited our perception is when we remain in our silos.



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