

Understanding and Listening: Keys to Collaboration

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Are we really still talking about collaboration? It seems like there have been decades of talk about collaboration between campuses and organizations, and yet we still need to work on it. Hopefully today is the day we stop talking about collaboration and make collaboration our reality. As authors of this article, we have both had the opportunity to work as campus-based professionals and organization staff members, which has allowed us to gain a broad perspective on how to forge collaborative relationships. As such, we have found collaboration can largely be summed up by two main themes: understanding and listening.

The book *Silos, Politics, and Turf Wars* by Patrick Lencioni is a great read for understanding the challenges we have with collaboration. Much can be garnered from the book and related to fraternity and sorority life and our work as organization staff members and campus-based professionals. In the text, Lencioni focuses on several fables that tell the reader stories of office silos developing inherent problems between staff members in various companies. These problems manifest into divides between divisions and departments that should be working together in order to create a successful company. Although not operating as a single organization or unit, campuses and headquarters often demonstrate these same silo experiences that create challenges for both sets of professional teams. Throughout the text, Lencioni describes several businesses facing major challenges of politics. In each instance, and in order to break down the silos and politics to create a more comprehensive and goal-focused group, listening and understanding were the focus. The fables in the text describe listening between divisions and business units; these groups had to gain an understanding of what they did and how they worked as individuals in order to be able to best collaborate to work together as a full team.

Lencioni also describes turf wars between the inner workings of the companies in his text. The combination of the turf wars, alongside silo work, created an environment where individuals are working without context. Context is critical as it tells the story for why an employee does the work they do, and how they fit into the big picture of the organization. We see this manifesting in the fraternal world in many ways, including when organization staff become overly focused on 'getting the program done at the chapter' even when it is the middle of final exams or when campus-based professionals demand organization staff travel to the campus with little to no notice. Certainly these programs and responses are often critical, requiring that they must be done and that they align with the safety and goals for our students. However, both parties can become so focused they cannot see the forest for the trees.

We certainly know, as a result of our professional work on both sides, that the goals are not always the same and that there are visions and objectives for each group that may not align. However, at the risk of support for collegiate chapters, we must listen and understand one another in order to collaborate and work together. We cannot continue to operate in silos without an understanding of the challenges and issues we face within on each side of the fence.

How should we move forward?

Understanding:

- As a campus-based professional, get to know the cycle and timeliness for inter/national organizations. Generally, most follow a similar pattern.
- As an organization staff member, do the same. Understand the campus cycle for exams, holidays, and breaks.
- Gain an understanding for the general philosophy and work approach. For campus-based professionals, this means learning if the organization is staff or volunteer driven; for organization staff members, this means getting to know who and how campus-based professionals approach work with undergraduate students.
- Understand there are also other constituents outside of just the campus, including area advisors, graduate chapters, and province and regional volunteers. Learn and understand how to best interact with these parties in an effort to create the strongest collaboration.

Listening:

- Have a conversation with someone from the “other side.” Find someone that you can connect with and talk in depth with about each other’s roles and responsibilities.
- Listen to someone’s concerns when they bring them to your attention and commit to actually listening rather than jumping to conclusions.
- Do not try to one up each other as you listen to one another. Everyone’s job is important and critical, and everyone has their successes and challenges.
- If you do not receive the answer you are expecting, listen to the reason why. There is more than likely a reason or strategy behind the decision.

Lencioni challenges us to step outside of our silos if we want to achieve success. Utilizing the simple yet critical concepts of understanding and listening can be the keys to finally unlocking the collaborative potential between campuses and organizations.

Reference

Lencioni, P. (2006). *Silos, politics & turf wars: A leadership fable about destroying the barriers that turn colleagues into competitors*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, A John Wiley & Sons.