

Cylinders of Excellence

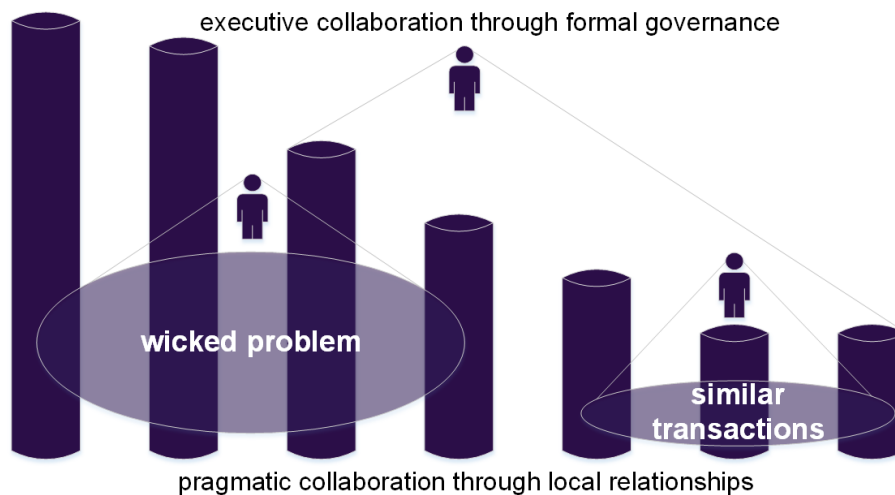
Publicly funded organisations and teams are often defined by the work they perform and the types of workers they employ, rapidly organising themselves into functional silos. Bringing people with similar skills and functions together in 'cylinders of excellence' can be efficient and satisfying within specialist domains, but these silos can hamper decision making and responses to complex and 'wicked' problems in the cracks between those domains.

Cylinders of excellence arise naturally in pursuit of efficiency and specialisation to improve the quality of publicly funded services. Silos are powerful organisational structures that foster deep content expertise and shared experience among people doing similar types of work. Clearly defined borders between functional silos help to ensure clear lines of accountability and effective management of large groups of people.

Resource allocation decisions tend to reinforce cylinders of excellence. Publicly funded organisations are incentivised to compete, rather than collaborate, to secure public funding and therefore focus their activities on achieving narrowly defined objectives.

Cylinders tend to form around supply factors that have little bearing on how outcomes are achieved. Workers divide into groups based on role characteristics such as being teachers, nurses, or accountants, or types of services such as case management, hospital care, or tertiary education, rather than according to public needs. Specialised silos are reinforced through shared intellectual frameworks, jargon, sources of authority, proximity, and access to information.

Similar ways of thinking and working within cylinders of excellence restrict diversity of ideas, constraining decision making and problem solving. Related, or even overlapping, activities in adjacent cylinders may also not be easily detected from within silos.



Specialisation has many advantages, but rigid silos can impose limitations that erode these benefits. Building connections between cylinders of excellence brings together different types of expertise and experience, informing better decisions both within and across cylinders. Connections can be formal, such as ministerial and executive committees, or relatively informal and intimate, such as regular operational interaction or virtual teams across silos. Once established, these connections create opportunities to find and address inefficiencies and inconsistencies, such as duplicated effort or competition across silos, and to generate new innovations in collaboration.

Wicked social policy problems, complex by nature, benefit both from greater collaboration across perspectives and from organising work around need.

By working together to solve problems and combine similar transactions, publicly funded organisations can harness the strengths of silos while overcoming some of their limitations. Collaboration need not weaken content specialisation or compromise 'excellence' but does increase the diversity of expertise and perspectives brought to bear on shared challenges.

Organising work around client groups rather than convenient supply cylinders tends to challenge traditional organisational structures, but can also increase the public value they create. Identifying and integrating or connecting related and overlapping work also improves efficiency, freeing up scarce resources.

Building connections between silos can prevent both good ideas, and citizens, from falling through the cracks between cylinders of excellence.