

When The Org Chart Gets In The Way Of Excellent Work

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Most construction firms are built on a clear, logical structure.

Operations. Preconstruction. Finance. HR. Business development. Each function has a defined role, a leader, and a place on the org chart. It works – until it doesn't.

As companies grow, that same structure that once created clarity can start to create friction. Information slows down as it moves between departments. Decisions get escalated instead of solved. Teams focus on optimizing their piece of the business, sometimes at the expense of the whole. No one designed it that way. It's just how siloed structures behave over time.

The challenge isn't that the functions exist. The challenge is how tightly we hold the boundaries between them.

There's a different way to think about organizing the work – one that doesn't require throwing out your structure but does require loosening it.

Instead of relying solely on hierarchy, leading firms are building networks of teams that work across functions, with more transparency, more shared ownership, and more day-to-day collaboration. And they're doing it not as a theory, but as a practical way to move faster and make better decisions.

FROM HANDOFFS TO SHARED OWNERSHIP

In many organizations, work moves in a sequence.

One group completes its portion, then hands it off to the next.



Preconstruction develops the estimate. Operations takes over execution. Finance monitors costs. Each step is important. Each team is capable.

But the handoffs create gaps.

Information gets filtered. Assumptions go untested. And when something doesn't go as planned – as it inevitably happens – the question becomes: "Where did it break down?"

A more collaborative model shifts the focus from handoffs to shared ownership.

Instead of working in sequence, the right people stay connected throughout the lifecycle of the work. They don't just contribute their piece – they understand how their decisions affect the entire project or business outcome.

At the home-office level, this can look like bringing together small, cross-functional teams to work on specific priorities – whether that’s pursuing a new type of project, improving client experience, or addressing a recurring operational issue.

These teams aren’t large committees. They’re small, focused groups with a clear objective and the ability to make progress without constant escalation.

WHAT CHANGES FOR LEADERS

This kind of shift doesn’t happen because you redraw the org chart. It happens because leaders change how they lead.

In a traditional hierarchy, leaders are often the point of coordination. Information flows up to them, decisions flow back down, and they ensure alignment across functions.

In a more networked model, leaders play a different role. They become connectors rather than controllers.

Their job is to ensure the right people are working together, that information is shared openly, and that teams have enough clarity, and enough trust, to move forward without waiting for permission on every decision.

That requires a shift in mindset.

It means being willing to let go of some of the control that comes with positional authority. It means trusting others to make decisions that you might have made yourself in the past. And it means creating an environment where questions, disagreement, and dialogue are part of how work gets done – not signs that something is off track.

For many leaders, that’s the harder part. Not because they don’t believe in collaboration, but because the existing structure has reinforced a different way of operating for decades.

A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

Consider a common challenge inside many firms: improving the client experience.

In a traditional structure, responsibility for this might be loosely defined. Business development owns the relationship early. Operations takes over once the project begins. Finance interacts around billing. Each group does its part well.

And yet, from the client’s perspective, it can feel disjointed.

Now imagine a small, cross-functional team formed specifically to look at the client experience end-to-end. Someone from operations. Someone from finance. Someone from business development. Perhaps someone from project management.

Their goal isn’t to represent their department. It’s to improve the experience as a whole.

They identify where communication breaks down, where expectations aren’t aligned, where internal processes create unnecessary friction for the client. And because they’re working together, not handing things off, they can solve those issues more effectively.

Just as importantly, they carry that shared understanding back into their respective areas of the business. Over time, that changes how decisions are made, even outside the team itself.

THREE PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT THE SHIFT

For firms that want to move in this direction, a few practical practices make a difference.

Start with smaller, self-directed teams. Not every initiative needs a large steering committee. In fact, smaller groups are often more effective. Give them a clear objective, the right mix of perspectives, and enough autonomy to make progress.

Increase transparency across functions. The more information is shared openly – priorities, challenges, constraints, project P+L – the easier it is for teams to align without constant oversight. Transparency builds trust, and trust reduces the need for control.

And begin to think less in terms of individual leaders and more in terms of leadership teams. Complex challenges rarely sit neatly within one function. When leadership is shared across a group, decisions tend to be more balanced and more sustainable.

None of this eliminates the need for structure. Roles still matter. Accountability still matters. But the structure becomes a foundation, not a barrier.


A DIFFERENT KIND OF STRENGTH

For many construction firms, hierarchy has been a source of strength. It brings order to complex work and ensures accountability in high-stakes environments. That doesn’t need to change.

But as the pace of business accelerates and projects become more complex, the ability to collaborate across boundaries becomes just as important as the clarity those boundaries provide.

Moving toward a more connected, team-based way of working isn't about abandoning what has worked. It's about building on it. It's about recognizing that the work itself has become more interconnected – and that your organization needs to reflect that reality.

In the end, the goal isn't a better org chart. It's better outcomes.

And those are almost always the result of people working together, not just working alongside one another. 



About the Author

Dr. Nanette Miner is an expert in building ready and capable leadership teams for succession and exit.

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