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open faced sandwich

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I stepped up to the counter and ordered a bagel with smoked salmon and cream cheese. I asked for the sandwich to be open-faced, "with salmon on both sides of the bagel so my friend and I can share it."

"No problem," Andrea*, the waitress behind the counter, told me. She punched a few buttons on the computer display of her cash register, electronically communicating our special order to the kitchen, and gave me a table stand with a number on it to identify us to the waiter responsible for serving the tables.

About ten minutes later, David, the waiter, brought out the bagel. It was open-faced but all the salmon was on one half of the bagel. The other half just had cream cheese.

No big deal. But the restaurant was nearly empty and I was curious. "Thanks," I said, "but I had asked for salmon on both sides of the bagel."

David apologized and took it back to the kitchen. A minute later, he came back. This time, the salmon was placed on half of each side of the bagel. The other half was plain cream cheese. Think salmon/cream cheese yin/yang symbol.

What's most interesting is what David said when he gave me the bagel. "I know this isn't what you wanted," he said, smiling sheepishly. "The chef obviously didn't get it."

Again, just to be clear, this was, of course, no big deal. I thanked him and took the bagel. But questions ran through my head: *If you knew, why didn't you explain it to the chef? When he gave you the bagel and you saw it wasn't what I wanted, why didn't you tell him? Or fix it yourself before bringing it out? And, finally, once you decided to bring it out as is, why blame the chef?*

There's a one-word answer to all those questions: silos.

Andrea's job was to take my order and transmit it to the chef. The chef's job was to create the sandwich. And David's job was to bring out the final dish. In fact, David did his job well. Only it wasn't the right dish.

This obviously isn't just an issue particular to a restaurant. It's an issue that most team members in most organizations face every day.

Here's the problem: Our jobs are complex and interdependent, but our goals, objectives, and, most importantly, mindsets, are often siloed.

We each have a job to do — sell a service, design a product, address a customer issue — and the underlying mindset is: if I do my job well, and you do your job well, we'll achieve our organization's goals.

But it rarely works that way. People in one silo often have information needed by — but never given to — people in another silo. And, as my experience in the restaurant showed, if there's a problem anywhere in the organization, everyone fails. Who is responsible for my sandwich? Andrea? The chef? David? It's a waste of time to parse that one out. And it's damaging to try. The truth is, they're all, collectively, responsible.

In other words — and this might be hard to swallow — we are responsible for each others' work.

This is not a question of blame. It's a practical reality of collaboration. And every organization of two or more is a collaborative effort.

After breakfast, I asked David ("for the sake of an article I'm writing") to spend a few minutes with me exploring his decision-making.

"Frankly," David told me, "I work with the chef every day and I didn't want to be too pushy. I didn't want to make him angry."

In other words, telling the chef that he had gotten the sandwich wrong — that the chef had made a mistake — was threatening to their relationship. It wasn't a risk David wanted to take.

"It was a split-second decision," David continued, "Is it worth a confrontation with the chef or would you guys be OK with the sandwich delivered wrong? You guys seem mellow and so I chose not to face the chef."

David decided it would be less painful to pass the mistake to the customer than to confront his colleague or superior about it. It would be easy to judge David for this if so many of us didn't make that same decision all the time.

How do we escape the silo mentality?

It helps if leadership is explicit about the cross-silo outcomes that are most important in the organization. It helps if everyone who works at the restaurant is clear that satisfying customers is their number one priority and that everyone is collectively responsible for that outcome. It helps if each person is committed to a whole that is larger than their part and if leaders communicate, prioritize, and reward for that outcome.

It also helps if the organization's structures and processes support collaboration. If people meet regularly to share what they are learning and are taught the skills to give and receive feedback. It helps if people are taught to communicate clearly, gently, and inoffensively with each other, avoiding blame and embarrassment, for the sake of cross-silo outcomes.

All that helps. But even with all that support, direction, and skill, it still takes one more critical ingredient. Perhaps the most critical.

Courage.

The courage of a single person willing to take personal risks for the sake of the organization's success.

Because no matter how clearly leaders reward cross-silo outcomes, it takes great personal strength to identify and help correct a mistake in "someone else's" silo and to overcome the fear of the consequences of taking responsibility for colleagues' work.

When I spoke with David, he agreed that it would have been better if he had said something to the chef. Better for me, better for the restaurant, better for the chef, and even, over time, his relationship with the chef.

"So will you do it?" I asked.

David — a good guy, someone with enough courage to explore his decision-making with me honestly — looked over at the kitchen for a second, then back at me, and smiling, shrugged.

***Names and some details changed**

Peter Bregman- Bio

Peter Bregman is the CEO of Bregman Partners and is a strategic advisor to CEOs and their leadership teams. He is the author of Point B: A Short Guide To Leading a Big Change and 18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done. Peter is a regular contributor to Harvard Business Review, Fast Company, and Forbes.

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