

KNOWING HOW TO KNOW

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If you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange these apples then you and I will still each have one apple. But if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange these ideas, then each of us will have two ideas." -George Bernard Shaw, Renowned Irish Author

Perhaps, it is because there is so much talk about knowledge, that there is so much clutter and confusion and as a result, 'the power of knowledge for organizations in the 2000s' often gets trivialized as jargon. After all, ours is the age of substitutes: instead of language, we have jargon: instead of principles, slogans: and, instead of genuine ideas, bright ideas and incomprehensible jargon 'betamax¹' simple language as the hallmark of knowledge!!!

This paper deliberates the nature of knowledge and the role of leaders in bringing in the appropriate culture and attitudes required to best leverage knowledge as a resource through setting expectation and example in an enabled environment.

Knowledge is of course all that is of consequence to the business. Knowledge is what gives organizations competitive edge. It includes documented explicit knowledge and captured tacit experiences which thrive in a collective congenial environment that nurtures learning. Creativity and innovation are key to contending in a new order of competition, in which, the critical success factors for business are essentially different from the conventional. Those who think that knowledge and learning is expensive

indulgence should seriously consider the price to be paid for ignorance.

It is difficult for organizations to know what they know or how to know what they know. Even though it is now so vital, knowledge still remains an incident, occasional to business activity rather than an integral resource to be acquired and managed. Considerably less is known about how an organization may know more by manipulating and creating an appropriate socio-cultural learning context. The essential mental settings and attitudes required for learning are hard to acquire for individuals, teams and companies. Few may be able to articulate how an organization could become a more learning, teaching, or coaching organization and what the value of this is. Often, organizational knowledge exists with multiple perspectives rather than as collective best thinking. Knowledge is often diffused rather than converged and organized. Thus both contribution as well as access to organizational knowledge becomes difficult.

Organizations can consciously make an attempt to best capitalize on knowledge resources by understanding the nature of this resource and creating the necessary organizational culture - leaders have a huge role to play.

The Nature of the Knowledge Resource

Knowledge as a resource has many interesting characteristics.

- ❖ Knowledge is dualistic in nature being both explicit and documentable and tacit or experiential and difficult to document.

- ❖ Knowledge is intangible.
- ❖ Knowledge is multidimensional.
- ❖ Knowledge is transient, ever changing.
- ❖ Knowledge is infinite and exponentiates itself.
- ❖ Knowledge is non rival and people can use it synchronously without depletion.
- ❖ Knowledge is contestable.
- ❖ Knowledge is socially constructed and culturally embedded.
- ❖ The barriers to knowledge transfer are mostly intangible- human qualities like custom, culture, ego, mindset, desire for power, ambition, fear of ridicule or competition and distrust.
- ❖ Knowledge is a power source and hence a potential source of conflict.
- ❖ The benefits of knowledge acquisition (by any means) are rather difficult to appreciate, difficult to measure and not easily amenable to valuation.
- ❖ No two people acquire knowledge or learn in exactly the same way due to prior individual attitudes, experiences, learning or intellectual makeup.
- ❖ Knowledge can be sticky and may not move from one person or set of persons fast, fast enough or at all.
- ❖ Knowledge is leaky and moves between people or between companies.
- ❖ Knowledge appetites can be influenced; Learning attitudes are infectious.
- ❖ Knowledge attainment brings inner joy, fulfillment and motivation to employees.

- ❖ Because of the 'essentially in flux' nature of knowledge, a list of knowledge characteristics like this one can go on increasing!

Enabling Sharing Through Information Technology

Knowledge multiplies by sharing and raises the ambient awareness level in an organization. Knowledge may be likened to a bottle of perfume. If it remains in the bottle, it can fester and lose power in isolation but spread around (judiciously!) is enjoyed by all. By nature human beings enjoy and secure in power; and knowledge is indeed a base for power, but it is by far the most democratic of all sources of power. The wisdom that, sharing knowledge brings rewards far beyond what hoarding knowledge can, is difficult to realize and is against baser human nature and therefore needs to be consciously promoted. Knowledge sharing must be championed and knowledge monopoly and stockpile discouraged by value, process and culture within organizations.

This difficult challenge has become made less insurmountable by information technology. First by automating and routinizing basic tasks that can be handled with minimum effort by technology, greater availability of time and energy is facilitated to concentrate on higher order decision making, larger issues and innovation.

Technology prompts documentation of recent and current actions. Therefore it generates a definite pressure that prevents people from continuing to do what they did before, just because they resist change or do not want to deal with the change. There has to be a strong motive for people to go out of

their way and disregard what the computer is asking them to enter. Thus the culture, process and technology ease 'stickiness' in knowledge transfer and alleviate attitudinal speed breakers in the transfer process. Technology would help people express what they know and access what they need without fear or diffidence.

A most recent example of a technology which promotes easier sharing by creating a social context is Vivek Paul's first entrepreneurial venture KineticGlue. Vivek Paul earlier led the medical equipment business for GE in India; he helped Azim Premji grow Wipro from a small firm with \$150 million in revenues to a \$1.4-billion global outfit; he made smart bets at PE firm TPG, a few of which turned multi-baggers in double quick time... and after 20 years of building businesses for others turned entrepreneur with KineticGlue which is helping hundreds of people at companies such as Dell India, Yes Bank and L&T Infotech collaborate better by using an online social medium, an official Facebook to share and increase productivity and retention for companies. This is reportedly a \$2.5 billion market space (11,750 crore ₹).

Setting Expectations

An organization's Social capital is integral to the management of its knowledge. Social capital includes:

- ❖ personal relationships that bind together members of the organization
- ❖ relationships that bind organizational members to other external resources and
- ❖ reputational capital

The leader had a huge role to play in changing or recasting his organization's mental moulds because people are incessant leader watchers. An effective leader does not know the most; he knows how his company can know the most. Watching leaders and retelling the stories of their actions helps people understand how to get ahead around here—how to act. If there is a tendency for leaders to keep their cards close to their chests, people in the organization will believe this is the way to act. The converse is also true.

People often tend to believe that great things and genius happen elsewhere. This type of subliminal erroneous thinking is similar to thinking that accidents happen only to other people. It is important to believe, to remember, and reinforce that valuable learning, good ideas or innovations can come from any source. No source is too unconnected or too humble, so the canteen contractor may well give a great idea to better the organizational supply chain.

An expectation of valuable and democratic contribution to the learning and innovation process has to be communicated to the employee (Pygmalion effect) and a self expectation level (Galatea effect) of greater achievement and contribution created in employees. The Pygmalion effect was described by J. Sterling Livingston in the September/October, 1988 Harvard Business Review. "The way managers treat their subordinates is subtly influenced by what they expect of them," Livingston said in his article, Pygmalion in Management. Once an expectation is set, even if it isn't accurate, we tend to act in ways that are consistent with that expectation. Surprisingly often, the

result is that the expectation, as if by magic, comes true.

There is a wonderful story. The abbot of a once famous Buddhist monastery that had fallen into decline was deeply troubled. Monks were lax in their practice; novices were leaving and lay supporters deserting to other centers. The abbot traveled far to meet a sage and recounted his tale of woe, of how much he desired to transform his monastery to the flourishing haven it had been in days of yore.

The sage looked him in the eye and said, "The reason your monastery has languished is that the Buddha is living among you in disguise, and you have not honored Him." The abbot hurried back, his mind in turmoil.

The Selfless One was at his monastery! Who could He be? Brother Hua?...No, he was full of sloth. Brother Po?...No, he was too dull. But then the Tathagata was in disguise. What better disguise than sloth or dull-wittedness? He called his monks to him and revealed the sage's words. They, too, were taken aback and looked at each other with suspicion and awe.

Which one of them was the Chosen One? The disguise was perfect. Not knowing who He was they took to treating everyone with the respect due to a Buddha. Their faces started shining with an inner radiance that attracted novices and then lay supporters.

In no time at all, the monastery far surpassed its previous glory (Source www.spiritual-short-stories.com).

An expectation of greatness creates powerfully transformational mutual respect among teams. The leader can set the expectation.

Setting Examples

First hand learning is possibly the best way to know. All the barriers that exist between the learner and the source of knowledge need to be broken, these may be custom, culture, ego, mindset, fear of ridicule or competition and distrust. Boundaries between companies and their cohorts and agencies, between companies and consumers and between the hierarchies within the company are being proactively peeled off in the quest for first hand information over versions through intermediates.

As an example, through the years organizations have acquired knowledge of consumers and consumer preferences through research agencies, which are valid sources of information. However if people got out of the ivory towers of their offices to meet with consumers there would be first hand learning which cannot be substituted . Recently leaders of several companies - Nitin Paranjpe of Hindustan Unilever, Kishore Biyani of Future Group, Vinita Bali of Britannia, Zubair Ahmed of GlaxoSmithkline, Harsh Mariwala of Marico, Adi Godrej of Godrej Industries, Kiyoshi Oike of Yakult and Sanjeev Chadha, like the kings of ancient lore who roamed their kingdom to know their subjects, made visits incognito to consumer homes to understand firsthand consumers' likes, dislikes and aspirations. New product ideas that reportedly emerged from conversations with conscientious mothers include Foodles (a functional food product) and one serving

packaged flavored milk convenient for school lunches from the Horlicks brand. Other winning ideas included biscuits in smaller packs, a hair dye advertisement based on scientific evidence.

In conclusion, leaders need to appreciate the resource value of knowledge and leverage it as an asset. They need to understand that the organizational culture has to be orchestrated in different ways than in earlier times. Leader involvement and the spirit of learning must be orchestrated. Learning thrives when the leader demonstrates that barriers can be broken, that genius is expected from individuals and teams.

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