

Reading List

Required Reading/Confab-August 2001

By Jeffrey Bartlett

Thursday, August 23, 2001

Learning to Fly:

Practical Lessons from One of the World's Leading Knowledge Companies

Chris Collison and Geoff Parcell

Capstone Publishing, 2001

ISBN 1-84112-124-X

\$24.95

This is an excellent introduction to the realities of managing knowledge. As the authors say more than once, it is short on theory and long on practice. KM practitioners at BP PLC, Collison and Parcell take most of their examples from BP's well-known knowledge-sharing efforts. Yet they often introduce concepts through nonwork scenarios familiar to anyone, such as learning to drive a car.

Perhaps the most compelling example they present of KM at work is BP's peer assist program, which brings engineers from all over the world together to solve pressing problems. Peer assist is famous for its effectiveness and the large, measurable cost savings it can produce. Such real-world programs, added to the commonsense approach the authors take, make this a welcome tool for people trying to grasp what KM is and how an organization can implement it.

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Book review: Learning to Fly

Patti Anklam reviews *Learning to Fly* by Chris Collison and Geoff Parcell

TITLE: *Learning to Fly - Practical Lessons from One of the World's Leading Knowledge Companies*
AUTHORS: Chris Collison & Geoff Parcell
PUBLISHER: Capstone Publishing (2001)
ISBN: 184112124X

When I started my job at Nortel a year ago, I handed out copies of *Enabling Knowledge Creation*[1] to get people thinking about knowledge management. I was focused on setting the context for knowledge management in the organisation, and this book provided a number of cues for strategic thinking and understanding the human component. This year, I would hand out *Learning to Fly* as the perfect companion, though to tell the truth, if I could hand out only one, it would be this great new book by Chris Collison and Geoff Parcell.

Based on their experience creating successful knowledge management processes, tools, and disciplines at BP Amoco, the book is the voice of experience speaking with maturity and confidence. Many knowledge management books come out every year, and it's pretty discouraging to read books that don't give much away, but this book is different. There are 19 endorsements printed on the front pages of the book, and 12 of them use the words practical, practitioner, or practice. The real engagement with this book comes from the voice of the 'been there done that', and guess what? The company has been tremendously successful and the knowledge management work played a part.

Learning to Fly is the nuts and bolts, from the trenches kind of book we might all wish we had when we were getting started. Even though we didn't have it then, we have it now, and it's not too late for us 'seasoned practitioners' to benefit from these flying lessons. If you are managing a KM programme already, you can use it to benchmark – and validate – your own projects and your progress. *Develop a holistic model. Check. Do lessons learned. Check. Enable people to find one another. Check. Communities of Practice. Check. Peer assist. Oh!* Just be careful not to skip over the parts that you think you know, because there are nuggets, tips, and reflective experiences waiting throughout. Something in this book will resonate with you and speak to something you are working on right now, today.

Revelations for me came from reading the step-by-step description of managing AARs (after action reviews) and the details on the implementation of the 'connections' programme. BP based its AAR programme on the US Army's successful programme, and adapted it for the BP environment. The authors emphasise early in the book that every programme needs to be developed in the context of the current environment; what works in one company won't work without modification elsewhere. We have to be flexible, learn from our peers in other companies, and be ready to adapt. One of the great distinctions that Collison and Parcell make is between 'learning while doing' and 'learning after doing'. The processes, the intent, and the context are quite different between these two, and the guidelines here are crisp, easy to understand, and easy to adapt and implement in your organisation.

The 'connect' project is a well-known knowledge management case study. I've heard it in overview many times, and I was delighted to find the details here, including how this knowledge directory was designed, marketed, adopted, and how it is integrated (within the holistic model) with after action

learning and project reviews. There is a lot to be gained from understanding the principles that guide the creation of a knowledge directory, and I particularly liked to see: "The content is essentially an advertisement for a conversation with the owner."

The chapter concludes with the ten key lessons learned from the two-year project, and these easily form the basis for benchmarking one's own existing directory or plans to create one.

The authors and publishers have done an excellent job on the information design. The book is easy to navigate: it's great for browsing (the text is signposted to help you find a spot you want to revisit) and for reading sequentially (processes are distinctly numbered and include facilitators' notes). Action fields are clearly marked throughout and often give more than adequate food for thought.

All those blurbs were right. This is a very good, practical book, and an excellent read.

Reference

1. Georg van Krogh *et al*, *Enabling Knowledge Creation* (Oxford University Press, 2000)

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