

A KM oversight structure

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This is second in a series on KM implementation techniques.

As practitioners of knowledge management, we constantly strive to find ways to transform KM concepts into practical and implementable actions. This means that we have to fit the application of KM to the specific structure, management style and operational processes of each organization.

KM frequently starts as a grass-roots enterprise. That is, KM-savvy individuals recognize the power of communities of practices and the harnessing of organizational knowledge and begin to codify and document resident knowledge.

That informal development of an organization's knowledgebase is often limited because the might and direction of senior leadership is not officially standing behind the effort. Most of the literature on KM focuses on what it is, not on how to do it. It is almost as if KM just happens. In practice, the installation of a viable KM capability must be integrated into an organization's management structure and business strategy. That is, it must be championed and resourced by the organization's senior leadership.

KM experts concur that the most valuable asset an organization has, notwithstanding the products it produces, is its intellectual assets—its employees. Let's ask two important questions. Is the mechanism leadership uses to make critical business decisions that successfully navigate the organization through fierce competition, quality product output or even survival worthy of its employees' loyalty and commitment? How does executive management demonstrate its commitment to preserving the organization's most valuable asset?

Using effective management systems, skills and competencies of staff can be tracked. Performance reviews can be made easier with clear processes. Effective training can be provided, benefits managed and company information can be shared to improve morale and knowledge. Best practices can also be shared to improve individual performances. But we assert that an appropriate infrastructure design is where managers and executives can come together to share (process) information and convert it into knowledge that can enable the organization's business strategy.

Integration team

We have created a device that we call the "integration team." The team will work on organizational and KM technical and continuous improvement issues. The initial tasks assigned to the team are:

- To organize in such a way that all of the organization's interests and disciplines are

represented.;

- To determine clear and measurable business and technical processes. The team will identify areas where activities overlap and create a business plan, which includes management and technical requirements, with metrics to measure the progress, success or failure of the effort. The metric system will be aligned directly with the business case issues and the KM requirements such that it will access and demonstrate incremental progress being made across the organization.;
- To develop a reporting mechanism for continuous improvement item tracking to keep record of items that have been successfully identified (based on data collection) and resolved, and report the findings to management. Establishment of a clearly defined measurement process will provide the momentum and maintenance of the KM program.;
- To continually foster a workplace that lends itself to continuous improvement vs. policing or auditing of organizational information. The ideal workplace would be where people's growth and participation occur within the framework of open teamwork, collaboration and open flow of new ideas. This way, a link exists between the bottom and top of the organization.;

Successful planning and decision-making is at the core of successful organizations. Where "change is a constant," businesses are challenged to constantly revise strategies within every area of the enterprise, from the supply room to the executive suite. Companies are embracing the idea that information must be shared across levels. They are acknowledging that decision-making authority needs to be distributed widely—systematic access to business data, competitive information and market demographics that support the decision-making process.

In the chart, we have depicted a generic oversight structure in which six categories of participants are identified. At the top of the structure is the Knowledge Management Executive Board (KMEB). That board is composed of the leadership of the organization—the senior-line managers who set the vision and direction of the organization and who have the authority to approve business strategies, organizational configurations and policies and guidelines. They also control the allocation of resources including budgets and people. The involvement of this group is what Mike Stankosky of George Washington University (gwe.edu) calls making KM a main event and not a side show. Supporting the executive board is the Integration Team. We like this term because the purpose of the team is to unify, synergize and rationalize KM activities across the organization. However, we have also used the terms steering committee and KM champions council to suit the preferences of our clients.

The integration team is ideally comprised of:

- a champion for each of the executive board members;
- a champion for each of the formally recognized communities of practice;
- a chief knowledge officer (CKO), and;
- a chief information officer (CIO).;

One of the primary responsibilities of the group is to ensure that knowledge is being disseminated and leveraged across the organization. The KMEB champions serve as a representative of their respective KMEB member. Their responsibilities include:

- Linking the KM strategy to the corporate strategy by elevating resource requirements to the KMEB, by seeking to raise the practice of KM to the same standard as other business practices,

and by tracking progress in achieving KM goals and objectives.;

- Promoting user needs of their stakeholders by ensuring that KM solutions are not sub optimized, by identifying barriers to effective KM employment, by providing a forum for fostering the flow of information among the enterprise members, and by identifying gaps and overlaps in KM practice.;

The community of practice champions serve as a representative of and spokesperson for their respective CoP. Their responsibilities include:

- Linking the CoP activities to the corporate strategy,;
- Elevating technology and other resource requirements,;
- Promoting the CoP contribution to meeting the stakeholder needs,;
- Identifying barriers to effective CoP contribution and integration,;
- Recommending solutions to overcoming the barriers, and ;
- Ensuring that CoPs do not become another type of stovepipe.;

The CKO enhances organization performance by removing any psychological and motivational barriers that deter people from sharing best practices, learning and moving information--while creating, maintaining and fostering norms and rewards that encourage people to share information. The CKO's three most important responsibilities are to:

- Build a knowledge-sharing culture, ;
- Create a knowledge management infrastructure, and ;
- Make it all pay off economically. ;

The CIO is concerned with improving peoples' ability to communicate electronically, share information and move data. As the developer and implementer of the KM technology backbone, the CIO is an essential advisor and contributor to the team.

As a part of its charter, the team will commission temporary working groups to evaluate and recommend solutions to crosscutting issues that are common across the organization. In "Cultivating Communities of Practice," Etienne Wenger states that: "One of the ways many communities take charge of their domain and pursue an explicit learning agenda is to commission project teams to explore a new topic area, create guidelines or identify different approaches to a practice." Where issues apply to multiple CoPs, the Integration Team will, similarly, create focused project teams.

We believe that our KM oversight structure can help move organizations to the next level of KM capability--a level where knowledge sharing processes are standardized, supported by leadership and fully integrated into the organizations' business processes.

Many organizations, even the more enlightened ones, are ineffective in their KM implementation, possible because their KM initiatives are often ad hoc and not connected to a common unifying business strategy. Attempts to break down organizational stovepipes by developing communities of practice have resulted in stovepipes of a different kind. That can lead to duplicative activities and the wasting of scarce

resources—resulting in leadership deeming a KM initiative ineffective.

In our next article, we show you how the CoP can be used as the organizational unit for defining the KM infrastructure for implementing change, and discuss how communities contribute to strategic objectives, learn to value and trust one another, and begin sharing knowledge.

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