

**"Can Knowledge Management Succeed Where Other Efforts Have Failed?"**

Margaret Wheatley

We all know we need to be much more skilled at the organizational survival skills that parade under the banner of Knowledge Management. Organizations need to be smarter, faster, more innovative, more agile. The complexity of the twenty-first century world has speeded up the pace of evolution, and those who can't learn, adapt, and change simply won't survive.

We all know this. Learning is what saves us. Knowledge Management should be something eagerly accepted by leaders, it should be an incredibly easy sell. Yet KM appears at a time when most organizations are battered and bruised by decades of fads, by investments in too many organizational change efforts that have not delivered what they promised. These experiences have exhausted us, made many cynical, and left at least some of us worried that we'll never learn how to create organizations that can thrive in the 21st century.

We need KM to succeed. But to achieve success when so much else has failed, we need to understand organizations differently. We need to notice what we have learned from all those failures. I'm suggesting that we take the time to reflect on those experiences and harvest our own knowledge lest we proceed blindly down the same familiar path that leads to disappointment. As we walk into the future, beckoned by this emerging field of Knowledge Management, we need time to reflect on and share what we have learned. Fortunately, this book helps us do just that.

Plato defined knowledge as "justified, true belief." In Western management, we have a set of beliefs that are particular to our culture. Most often we can't see these beliefs, even though they become visible in behavior and the choices we make. For several years now I have been trying to bring these beliefs into focus, in order to understand why change efforts succeed or fail. Here are several of our "justified" beliefs which I think seriously impede us from creating the organizations we need

- Organizations are machines. We create separate parts--tasks, roles, functions--and engineer (and reengineer) them to achieve pre-determined performance levels. It is the role of managers to recombine the parts to achieve those outcomes. Strangely, we also seem to believe that people can be treated as machines.
- Only material things are real. We work hard to try and make invisible "things" (like knowledge) assume material form. We accomplish this by assigning numbers to them. This practice combines with the next belief;
- Only numbers are real. (This belief is ancient, dating back to the sixth century BC.) These two beliefs lead to;
- You can only manage what you can measure. And this need for measurement has created a new deity to worship, which is;
- Technology saves.

called it "Knowledge Management," and treated it as a responsibility that can be assigned to a few of the elite.

Their assessment of Western approaches to KM makes our beliefs visible. As long as we think of knowledge as a substance to be engineered, as a material "thing" to be produced, measured, catalogued, warehoused, traded, and shipped, we will not succeed. The language of KM is littered with this "thing" thinking. We want to "capture" knowledge; to inventory it; to push it in to or pull it out from people. David Skyrme, from the UK, writes that in both Britain and the U.S., a common image of KM is of "decanting the human capital into the structural capital of an organization." I don't know how this imagery affects you, but I personally don't want to have my head opened, my cork popped, to be emptied of what I know by having it poured into an organizational vat. This prospect is not what motivates me to notice what I know, or to share it.

These language choices have serious implications. They reveal that we think knowledge is an entity, something that exists independent of person or context, capable of being moved about and manipulated for organizational advantage. We need to step away from this language and, more importantly, the beliefs that engendered it. We need to think of knowledge differently so we can step off our well-trodden road to implementation failure.

Many authors in this volume challenge us with different beliefs and experiences. They have gone into these bold experiments ahead of us and returned with reports of the thickets and snares that prevent successful KM implementation, and also provided clear insights about the processes and attitudes that make it work. As you read their different models, techniques, and technologies, I urge you to listen for a unified voice that resounds in their chronicles. As a chorus, they warn that we will seriously stumble if we do not attend in profound new ways to what we always want to ignore: the human dimension.

Think, for a moment, about what you know about knowledge, not from an organizational perspective, but from your life experience. In myself, I notice that knowledge is something I create because I am in relationship to another person, event, or idea. I engage with something outside myself, think about what it might mean, and develop interpretations that make sense to me. Knowledge is something I create through my engagement with the world. This may be why Plato called it "justified, true belief." It feels true for me, justified, because it works in my life.

From Biology, it is evident that all life engages in knowledge creation. We humans are no different. When asked to do a task, most of us feel the need to change it in some way. We fine-tune it, we adapt it to our unique context, we add our own improvements to how the task gets done. We are developing new knowledge all the time. A few months ago, I sat on an airport commuter bus and listened in amazement as the driver trained a newly hired employee. For thirty minutes I eavesdropped as she energetically revealed the secrets and efficiencies she had discovered for how to get to the airport in spite of severe traffic or bad weather. It was a non-stop, virtuoso performance of knowledge sharing, and I'm sure her supervisor had no idea that this was going on. People develop better ways of doing their work all the time, and we also like to brag about it. In many surveys, (a 1998 U.S. one is quoted in an article here) workers report that most of what they learn about their job, they learn from informal conversations. They also report that they frequently have ideas for improving work but don't tell their bosses.

If knowledge creation is natural, and if wanting to share what you know is so humanly satisfying, then what's the problem? In organizations, what sends these behaviors underground? Why do workers go dumb?

focus on each thing as an asset, that it is not knowledge that is the asset. People are.

## **2. Human needs and motivation lead us naturally to create knowledge.**

Study after study confirms that people want their work to provide growth, recognition, meaning, and good relationships. We want our lives to mean something, we want to contribute to others, we want to learn, we want to be together. And we must be involved in decisions that affect us. If we believed these studies, it would make working together far more productive and enjoyable. We would recognize that there are many positive energies available. We could trust and respect one another; we could rely on one another. As a species, we are actually very good to work with.

## **3. Everybody is a knowledge worker.**

This truth was stated by one of my clients as an operating principle. If everybody is assumed to be creating knowledge, then the organization has a responsibility to provide open access to information to everyone. And we could assume that knowledge will be found everywhere in the organization, not just in a few functions or some special people. This is a clear learning from the Japanese experience with KM, and also from my bus ride.

## **4. People choose to share their knowledge.**

This learning reverberates in several articles. "A common problem in most KM programs," writes David Skyrme, "is that individuals do not share their knowledge." But we willingly share what we know if we think it's important to the work, if we feel encouraged to learn, if we want to support a colleague. The discovery in every organization of self-organized Communities of Practice is evidence of this willingness. Some of the conditions that make people willing to learn and share their learnings are: people understand and support the work objective or strategy; people understand how their work adds value to the common objective; people know and care about each other; people feel personally connected to their leaders; people feel respected and trusted.

## **5. Knowledge management is not about technology.**

This would seem obvious from the preceding learnings, but it feels important to stress because, in the West, we are dazzled by technical solutions. If people aren't communicating, we just create an intranet; if we don't know what we know, we just create an inventory data base; if we're geographically dispersed, we just put videocams on people's desks. But these technical solutions don't solve a thing if other aspects of the culture-the human dimension-are ignored. BP did succeed in connecting up their offshore rigs using desktop videocams. But they were also working simultaneously to create a culture that recognized individual contribution, and to rally employees behind a bold new vision. And other organizations provide evidence that in the absence of face-to-face meetings, people have a hard time sharing knowledge. I think it's important to remember that technology does not connect us. Our relationships connect us, and then we eagerly use the technology. We share knowledge because we are in relationship, not because we have broader band width.

## **6. Knowledge is born in chaotic processes that take time.**

The irony of this learning is that it demands from us two things we don't have: a tolerance for messy, non-linear processes, and time. But creativity is only available when we relax into confusion, open our minds to not-knowing, and wait for insight to surprise us. New knowledge is born in messy processes that take time. Insights and innovations are the

already possessed. We can't argue with the clear demands of knowledge; it requires time to grow. It grows inside human relationships. Relationships and creativity are always messy.

One last reflection. Takeuchi and Nonaka remind us that knowledge, unlike information, is about, "commitment and beliefs; it is a function of a particular stance, perspective or intention. In this respect, the creation of new knowledge is as much about ideals as it is about ideas." We need to really contemplate this wisdom. It can help us see more clearly the work that we name as Knowledge Management. We need to understand that we are working with "ideals," the strong energies that power human work. People want to learn and grow, we want to work for purposes we believe in. Working for an organization that is intent on creating knowledge is a wonderful motivator, not because the organization will be more profitable, but because our lives will feel more worthwhile. Of the many learnings available from our colleagues, I find this the most promising.

[\*\*Back To Top of Page\*\*](#)