

Creating a Knowledge Sharing Culture

Author(s)

[David Gurteen](#)

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It is often said that it is essential to create a "Knowledge Sharing Culture" as part of a Knowledge Management initiative. An isolated knowledge management programme looked after by a privileged few is a paradox in itself and will not survive for long. Only effective collaboration and communication which spans across the whole company structure will give knowledge management the boost it really needs. In order to enrich a company's current culture **David Gurteen** believes that change must start at the individual. Every employee has a sphere of influence along with their own individual knowledge, and this is where he believes a knowledge sharing culture can begin.

Culture, according to Vijay Sathe is "the set of important understandings (often unstated) that members of a community share in common." These shared understandings consist of our norms, values, attitudes, beliefs and 'paradigms'.

Another definition given in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* – "culture is the integrated pattern of human behaviour that includes thought, speech, action, and artefacts and depends on man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations." This second definition is an exciting one as increasing our capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge is one of the prime aims of Knowledge Management.

The Paradigm

The concept of the paradigm is an extremely important one in understanding culture. A paradigm is a way of thinking, perceiving, communicating or viewing the world. It is often called a worldview or a mindset. The important point about a paradigm is that it is subconscious. We are not aware of our own paradigms. Its a rather like thinking the world is coloured red – unaware that we are wearing rose tinted contact lenses. It is a frequently misunderstood and misused word. When someone says "we need a new paradigm for this." It is a misuse of the word. All they are saying is "we need a new approach or we need a new way of looking at things".

Organisational Culture

Organisational culture can be thought of as a relatively rigid tacit infrastructure of ideas that shape not only our thinking but also our behaviour and perception of our business environment. It effectively establishes a set of guidelines by which members of an organisation work and how those organisations are structured. It is rigid mainly due to our paradigms – we don't recognise why we do so much of what we do. Also we tend to resist change rather than embrace it.

Knowledge and Information

Knowledge is often seen as a rich form of information. This differentiation however is not terribly helpful. A more useful definition of knowledge is that it is about *know-how* and *know-why*. A metaphor is that of a cake. An analysis of its molecular constituents is *data* – for most purposes not very useful – you may not even be able to tell it were a cake. A list of ingredients is *information* – more useful – an experienced cook could probably make the cake – the data has been given context. The recipe though would be *knowledge* – written knowledge - *explicit knowledge* – it tells you *how-to* make the cake. An inexperienced cook however, even with the recipe might not make a good cake. A person, though, with relevant knowledge, experience, and skill – knowledge in their heads - not easily written down - *tacit knowledge* – would almost certainly make an excellent cake from the recipe.

It is important to note that to make knowledge productive you need information. Knowing how to make a cake is not sufficient – you need the list of ingredients. And to decide what cake to make - you need information – the tastes of the consumers of the cake.

Know-why is also important. If an ingredient of the cake was unavailable – knowing the purpose of that ingredient might help a knowledgeable cook substitute an alternative. In fact know-why is often more important than know-how as

it allows you to be creative - to fall back on principles – to re-invent your know-how.

Knowledge Management

There are many definitions of Knowledge Management. A common definition is 'The collection of processes that govern the creation, dissemination, and leveraging of knowledge to fulfil organisational objectives.' I feel this definition is inadequate, however, as it limits knowledge management to a set of processes. I prefer what I feel is a more useful definition: -

"Knowledge Management is a business philosophy. It is an emerging set of principles, processes, organisational structures, and technology applications that help people share and leverage their knowledge to meet their business objectives."

This puts focus and responsibility on the individual – the knowledge worker - and on the holistic nature of knowledge management. Also critically it is about meeting business objectives. Knowledge Management is not an end in its self. It is also fundamentally about sharing knowledge and putting that knowledge to use.

Why Sharing Knowledge is Important

Today, the creation and application of new knowledge is essential to the survival of almost all businesses. There are many reasons. They include: -

- “ Intangible products - ideas, processes, information are taking a growing share of global trade from the traditional, tangible goods of the manufacturing economy.
- “ Increasingly the only sustainable competitive advantage is continuous innovation. In other words the application of new knowledge.
- “ Increasing turn over of staff. People don't take a job for life any more. When someone leaves an organisation their knowledge walks out of the door with them.
- “ "Our problem as an organisation is that we don't know what we know". Large global or even small geographically dispersed organisations do not know what they know. Expertise learnt and applied in one part of the organisation is not leveraged in another.
- “ Accelerating change - technology, business and social. As things change so does our knowledge base erode – in some businesses, as much of 50% of what you knew 5 years ago is probably obsolete today.

Creating a Knowledge Sharing Culture

What then does it mean to create a Knowledge Sharing Culture?" Well it's about making knowledge sharing the norm. To create a knowledge sharing culture you need to encourage people to work together more effectively, to collaborate and to share - ultimately to make organisational knowledge more productive. But we need to remember a few things:

- “ We are talking about sharing knowledge and information – not just information.
- “ The purpose of knowledge sharing is to help an organisation as a whole to meet its business objectives. We are not doing it for its own sake.
- “ Learning to make knowledge productive is as important if not more important than sharing knowledge. Michael Schrage in a recent interview said that he thinks, "knowledge management is a bullshit issue" as "most people in most organisations do not have the ability to act on the knowledge they possess".
- “ Changing a culture is tough. Not only does it mean change – which has always been tough – it means seeing the world in a different way. It means revealing our hidden paradigms like the tacit acceptance that "knowledge is power".

Rewarding Knowledge Sharing

We are told by many of the gurus that rewards must be put in place to encourage knowledge sharing. I've even heard it suggested, that to encourage knowledge sharing, that an ideas database should be created and that people should be paid for their contributions - presumably regardless of quality or whether the ideas are brought to fruition! I think this

is plain crazy. **I don't believe you can make people share by overtly rewarding them. We are not laboratory pigeons. Stimulus-response does not work in complex systems. Human beings are motivated by more than just money.** Yes, ensure appropriate rewards are in place if you must but I feel its better to ensure that disincentives to sharing are removed.

Motivating Knowledge Sharing

The real answer is to help people see for themselves that knowledge sharing is in their personal interest. The old paradigm was "knowledge is power". Today it needs to be explicitly understood that "sharing knowledge is power".

If people understand that sharing their knowledge helps them do their jobs more effectively; helps them retain their jobs; helps them in their personal development and career progression; rewards them for getting things done (not for blind sharing); and brings more personal recognition, then knowledge sharing will become a reality.

So what are the reasons to share that should motivate people? Here are a few: -

“ Knowledge is a perishable. Knowledge is increasingly short-lived. If you do not make use of your knowledge then it rapidly loses its value.

“ Even with the low level of knowledge sharing that goes on today – if you do not make your knowledge productive than someone else with that same knowledge will. You can almost guarantee that whatever bright idea you have someone else somewhere in the organisation will be thinking along the same lines.

“ By sharing your knowledge, you gain more then you lose. Sharing knowledge is a synergistic process – you get more out than you put in. If I share a product idea or a way of doing things with another person – then just the act of putting my idea into words or writing will help me shape and improve that idea. If I get into dialogue with the other person then I'll benefit from their knowledge, from their unique insights and improve my ideas further.

“ To get most things done in an organisation today requires a collaborative effort. If you try to work alone – you are likely to fail – you need not only the input from other people but their support and buy-in. Being open with them; sharing with them, helps you achieve your objectives.

Overcoming the Objections

Some people object to sharing as they feel that others will steal their ideas and reap the rewards rightly theirs. This is a fallacy. Knowledge sharing isn't about blindly sharing everything; giving away your ideas; being politically naive; or being open about absolutely everything. You still need to exercise judgement. If you have a great idea – don't share it with a competitor – external or internal but on the other hand don't try to develop it on your own and don't sit on it for fear of it being stolen from you. Figure out how you can bring it to fruition by collaborating with other people.

There is also another fallacy embedded in this thinking – knowledge sharing is not just about sharing great ideas – its about improving the way that things get done by sharing the little things. You have lots of knowledge of little use to you – share it with others who can make use of it and in return they will share relevant knowledge with you.

Making it Happen

My personal view is that knowledge sharing starts at the individual. After all - if you are a CEO, a mid-level manager, a receptionist, or a graduate trainee you are still an individual. Each one of us has his or her job, set of objectives and sphere of influence.

If you believe that knowledge sharing is the way to help you; your department; team or organisation meet its objectives then start to practice it within your sphere of influence and encourage others to do the same – "lead by example". The higher up the organisation the more influence you have. And remember sharing is not just about giving. It is about: -

- “ Soliciting feedback
- “ Asking questions
- “ Telling people what you plan to do before doing it
- “ Asking other people for help
- “ Asking someone to work with you in some way - however small
- “ Telling people what you are doing and more importantly why you are doing it.

- “ Asking people what they think; asking them for advise
- “ Asking people what would they do differently
- “ Not just sharing information but know-how and know-why

Fundamentally sharing is about being more open in your way of work and in your relationships with other people.

The Role of Technology

Some people will argue that you do not need technology to implement a Knowledge Management programme. To some extent they are right - Knowledge Management is fundamentally about people – not technology. But to my mind there is absolutely no way that you can share knowledge effectively within an organisation – even a small one, never mind a large geographically dispersed one without using technology.

Technology plays a crucial transformational role and is a key part of changing the corporate culture to knowledge sharing one. In many ways it is technology that has made knowledge sharing a reality – in the past it was impossible to share knowledge or work collaboratively with co-workers around the globe. Today it is a reality.

Technology is not all good however. There are many pitfalls to its effective use. Information overload is one that comes readily to mind. Flaming wars (destructive heated electronic arguments) is another. Time wasting - browsing irrelevant stuff is yet another.

If implemented well and if people are trained and educated in its use, knowledge sharing technology is good. Not only can you find the information and knowledge you need quickly and effectively but you can post your knowledge on the system for access by others in the organisation - be they at the next desk or on the other side of the world. But more than just this, groupware technology such as Lotus Notes/Domino working over the Internet, your organisational Intranet or Extranet allows you to work collaboratively with anyone anywhere in the world to achieve your objectives.

Summary

The most effective way to create a knowledge sharing culture – is first to start to practice it at your level. The higher up the organisation the more effective you will be in changing the culture but even if you are low down the hierarchy – you have an influence. Second, put in place the knowledge sharing technology and train and educate people in its effective use. The two together – people with the appropriate knowledge sharing mindset and the appropriate knowledge sharing technology to support them will rapidly bring about a knowledge sharing culture that helps you better meet your business objectives.