

Evangelising Knowledge Management

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Introduction

I often hear it said at conferences that for Knowledge Management to be successful - it must start at the top – that if senior management do not buy in - in particular the chief executive - then it will fail. In many ways I agree - the fastest most successful way to implement a Knowledge Management strategy is if it is driven from the top. When I hear this said though, I see many people in the audience sigh for they know that to get top buy-in in their organisation will be a Herculean task.

I feel though that it is abdicating responsibility to wait for a lead from the top - one that might never come. Each of us, whether an administrative assistant, a new graduate, a team leader, or middle manager has a sphere of influence, however small or large, and can start to make Knowledge Management a reality in our own lives and our own organisations today. It might be slow, it might be imperfect but it will be a damn sight better than doing nothing at all.

In this paper, I would like to briefly explore a few of the many ways in which we can all start to adopt Knowledge Management behaviours in our daily lives and how we can influence other people to do the same. In short to become "Knowledge Management Evangelists".

So let's take a look at four ideas:

- .. Sharing
- .. Dialogue
- .. Best Practices
- .. After Action Reviews

Share your Knowledge

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. But remember sharing is more than just 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.

Sharing can take time and we do not always have time. It's tempting to share more by copying people on e-mail. This is easy and takes little effort and of course you need to ensure that everyone who "needs to know" is informed but if you copy too many people on an e-mail then all you do is contribute to their information overload. They will certainly not thank you for that.

To my mind, one of the best ways of improving sharing is to talk openly with people when you get 'dead' periods during the day. Over lunch; before a meeting - if you have arrived a little early; on the plane, train, or car; – times which might otherwise get wasted – start a "sharing conversation". Orient the discussion towards your colleague and communicate the message that you wish to help them and you wish to learn from them.

Encourage Dialogue

Openness, I believe is fundamental to creating a Knowledge Management culture. Knowledge is not going to be effectively shared; knowledge is not going to be broadly utilised and new ideas are not going to flourish in an organisation that is not open. Where the norm is sharing, where the norm is "telling it the way it is" then learning is enhanced and progress can be made.

There is a fundamental problem however in the way we relate to each other and in the way we 'discuss' or 'argue' issues - whether one to one, in small groups or in meetings. Lets take a look at what some 'thought leaders' say on this issue. In the words of Stephen Covey we listen 'with the intent to reply - not the intent to understand' - hence Stephen's fifth habit "[Seek first to understand, then to be understood.](#)" David Bohm sees discussion as where "[people hold relatively fixed positions and argue in favour of their views as they try to convince others to change](#)". Edward de Bono talks about "[argument becoming case making, point-scoring and ego-strutting](#)".

The problem is that discussion is too often about 'argument' - about steam rolling something through about forcing agreement or compromise. It is about confrontation. It has nothing to do with creativity or the exploration of possibilities. In short our habitual ways of thinking are anti-creational. It is worse when anything of fundamental significance is at stake - attitudes harden to the extent that it is extremely difficult to make progress at all - people have hidden agendas - people perceive hidden agendas - discussion verges on open warfare. Extrovert types do battle while introverts recede into their shells. Such 'discussion' is not creative - it is destructive not only of the 'truth' but worst of all of 'relationships'.

So is there an alternative? Yes. This is where *dialogue* plays its role. Dialogue is based on the work of David Bohm and I believe about to become more widely understood and accepted by the publication of a new book entitled 'Dialogue' by Linda Ellinor and Glenna Gerard of the Dialogue Group.

In dialogue: You prefer a certain position but do not cling to it. You are ready to listen to others. Your mindset is not one of 'convincing others that your way is right' but of asking what you can learn from others. It is recognising that their input will help you refine your own ideas or point out where you are wrong. It is not a fight. It is not win-lose. In dialogue all sides win by coming up with a more appropriate solution than a single person could ever have.

So I would encourage you to be more open; more challenging though diplomatic and to take some time to better understand and practice *dialogue*.

Develop and Share Best Practices

Knowledge Management at a high level can be about re-engineering existing organisational processes to ensure that knowledge is captured, disseminated, shared and made productive. But a large complex organisational process consists of smaller everyday processes – processes carried out at the individual level. If the quality of these personal processes is lacking then clearly it effects the quality of the larger process of which they are part.

Now, depending on our position, we might not have too much influence on the larger processes in our organisation but we do have control over our own everyday personal processes. So why not start there and think about our own processes? They can be very simple ones. For example:

- .. how we answer the telephone
- .. how we manage our e-mail,
- .. how we prepare for a presentation or
- .. how we write a report

Its very easy to do – you can also think of it as identifying your everyday "practices" and exploring how you might improve them – to create your own "best practices". The idea is to write down your personal practices. Nothing elaborate is needed – a simple checklist will suffice. Then each and every time you come to execute one of your practices – take out your checklist and ensure that you are not missing anything. And when you have finished – look at your checklist again and update it in light of what you have learnt.

Now the important part. When you have a document that you feel good about – offer to share it with other people. What ever you do – do not mail it out to fifty people for comment. Find a close colleague who is interested in the practice - talk with them face to face and share it with them. Get their feedback and refine your practice. Now spread it slowly. Maybe share it with your manager or team leader. Maybe your department can create a database of best practices. It does not really matter – the important thing is to do something - to make a start – and in doing so influence the people around you by leading by example. Even if you fail to influence people you will have improved your own effectiveness and productivity.

Institutionalise After Action Reviews

One very powerful knowledge management tool is the "After Action Review". An "After Action Review" or AAR as it more conveniently called is a simple process for improving learning on a daily basis. It originated in the US Army and has been widely evangelised by Edward Guthrie of Values International.

The concept behind an AAR is incredibly simple. After an event – you conduct an AAR. You ask the questions:

- “ What were the planned objectives?
- “ What really happened?
- “ What were the differences and why did they occur?
- “ What can be learnt?

What is an event? It is any task or activity that has:

- “ a beginning and an end
- “ a purpose
- “ measurable objectives

It may be an entire action or small part of a larger action such as a meeting or a presentation. For example:

- “ a complete client assignment
- “ a day with a client
- “ a telephone call
- “ a day in the office
- “ a week's work

BP Exploration has developed this tool further. They have developed the concept of "Learn Before", "Learn During" and "Learn After".

“ Learn Before - before a project starts – a project leader might call upon people who have run similar projects in the past and a meeting is held to discover what can be learnt from the past.

“ Learn During - during a project AARs are conducted on a regular basis.

“ Learn After - finally at the end of a project a large more formal AAR is held to determine what can be learnt from the whole project.

Now the key point I wish to make here is that we can all start to conduct AARs today. They are easy to run and their payback is high. We can start by just conducting them personally – for personal events or if we are a team leader or manager for team events.

We also have the opportunity where appropriate to suggest them at any meeting we attend. Quite simply at the end of a meeting – suggest holding an AAR. It need only take a few minutes. Ask the questions:

- “ What was the purpose of this meeting?
- “ Did we achieve it?
- “ If not, why not?
- “ What was learnt?

If it's a meeting with a customer – we can a conduct two AARs - one with the customer and the second back in the

office or in the car where maybe quite different learnings emerge. We can also use the above questions to help document meetings or events.

The key point is that the AAR is a very powerful tool and as individuals we have the ability to take it and adapt it to our own needs and to evangelise its use throughout our organisations.

At a personal level, I find it useful for reviewing a day's work and for reviewing a week's work. Another nice feature is that when you come to ask the question "What were the objectives of this event?" – you often find that you had no objectives or at least no agreed ones. A lesson in itself – if you start to take AARs seriously then you find yourself thinking about and setting objectives for every event in your daily work lives.

Summary

My summary is brief. We should not abdicate responsibility. We can all help make Knowledge Management happen in our organisations and start to make a difference. I've explored just a few ideas – there are many more.

Suggested Reading

• Bohm, David and Peat, David F., *Science, Order & Creativity*, Routledge, London, 1989. An interesting book - written about science but with applicability to the business world. Introduces the concept of dialogue.

• Covey, Stephen R., *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Simon & Schuster, London, 1992. An exceptional book. If you wish to gain more self-knowledge then you should read this book.

• Drucker, Peter F., *Post-Capitalist Society*, Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford, 1993.

• De Bono, Edward, *I am Right You are Wrong*, Penguin Books, London, 1991. An excellent book on the limitations of black & white thinking.

• De Bono, Edward, *Six Thinking Hats*, Penguin Books, London, 1990. The "Six Thinking Hats" is a powerful group dialogue tool for making your state of mind explicit.

• Ellinor, Linda and Gerard, Glenna, *Dialogue*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New York, 1998. A recent powerful description of the concept of dialogue. A must-read if you wish to know more about dialogue. Also see: <http://www.thedialoguegrouponline.com/>

• Peters, Tom, *The Circle of Innovation*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1997. Excellent book on innovation in the usual Tom Peters provocative style.

• Ray, Michael and Myers, Rochelle, *Creativity in Business*, Doubleday, New York, 1986. A 'new age' personal guide to creativity.

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