

Viewpoint

Knowledge Management Needs Organizational Learning for Human Context

by [Howard Rowley, Xansa](#)

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Context

Much has been written and even more said about knowledge management as a panacea for the enduring businesses of the new millennium. The liberated knowledge worker is being provided with a raft of technology--from intranet, through data mining, to information architectures--to manage and share his new contribution. But the flaws in this approach have become obvious. While technology is a great enabler for the flow of data and information, it does not turn it into knowledge. Indeed the exploitation of the technology prompts other knowledge bearers to want to share the fruits of their own experience and wisdom, but the organization becomes a barrier to success--the weakest link.

To rectify this imbalance, and to use knowledge effectively, what is needed is an organization that encourages the development of knowledge and the sharing of insights--a learning organization.

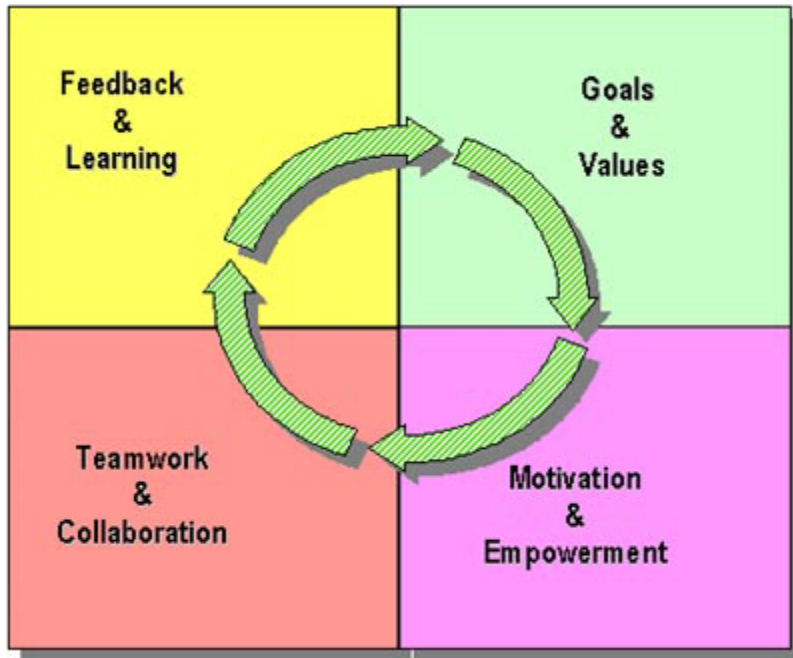
How are organizations dispelling the traditional call of "knowledge is power"? what is inducing more selfless attitudes? What are the human pre-conditions for managing knowledge and becoming a learning organization?

The human context goes to the heart of every successful organization. In exploring our learning organization model, we can begin to identify these facets of the human context and examine how the direction, motivation and behavior of people can make the difference in leveraging knowledge and stimulating group learning.

Learning Organization Model

The core elements required to build and sustain an organization that will create and manage knowledge effectively are outlined in the following four-cell model. This model has a few basic attributes and dynamics:

- Each cell must achieve tangible outcomes.
- Mutual dependencies and tensions exist between cells.
- Circular arrows indicate that cells must perform consistently to sustain momentum.
- The model can be scaled to any level; functional department or entire branch, a project or program, a total organization or linked/virtual organizations. The size and scope of the organization unit does, however, raises the significance of 'consistency and tensions' in how momentum is sustained.



Let's look at the model in more detail and draw some examples from experience.

Goals and Values

Innovative leaders are developing new shared ethics of how knowledge and learning are vital as the glue to their enterprise, and to winning teams within their organizations. New values based on openness, accessibility, collaboration, sharing and teamwork are in the forefront. These same leaders want to build and accentuate this new vitality by measuring and changing their corporate cultures.

Many enlightened companies are linking their human resources policies and practices to achieve the knowledge values they espouse, with, for example, staff rotation and mobility, and with early retirement and consultation, to maximize access and diffusion of knowledge within new knowledge networks.

Successful knowledge managers must eliminate incongruence of targets, measures and rewards. Many organizations are not sufficiently explicit or scientific in linking their knowledge creation objectives with management targets and reward mechanisms.

Motivation and Empowerment

Motivation requires well-designed reward and recognition systems. People must be rewarded for both performance and behavior. Recognition schemes are powerful ways for the organization to articulate the significance of knowledge creation, sharing and reuse. Regular informed communication can sustain the power of the message, and can reinforce how we value collaboration and sharing of learning across the company.

In recent years, we have seen the rise of a the flat organization structure, which is increasingly replacing the conventional command-and-control hierarchy. Clarity of staff empowerment and obligations has introduced potential to cut across organizational divides, build cross-functional teams to solve problems and forge new communication networks to share learned solutions.

The growth of informal contracts and obligations between employer and employee are giving rise to new insights in motivation. Organizations want their people to add value; at the same time, managers and staff are seeking opportunities to build value in their own repertoire. A learning environment that encourages knowledge sharing meets both needs.

Teamwork and Collaboration

Process improvement thinking has not only shaken the vertically structured organization, it has forged new paradigms on working across the organization, paying less heed to conventional business functions. Collaboration, involvement and cross-discipline teamwork has moved from being a -off, task team response to a regular style of working. People's success and value is being based not on seniority or power but on knowledge contribution and the ability to manage and challenge within a different organizational matrix.

This is where we see the dynamics of values, motivation and collaboration creating knowledge and learning simultaneously. Successful knowledge brokers within these teams are empowered to respect and challenge conventional wisdom as well as organization rules.

Feedback and Learning

Key skills in a learning organization support core processes:

- Systematic problem solving
- Experimentation
- Learning from past experience
- Learning from others
- Transferring knowledge

Outcomes from these processes not only fulfill the driving objectives of the organization, but sustain the momentum of the thirst for knowledge development.

The greatest barrier for many organizations lies in poor feedback, i.e. starting the process but not closing the loop. All too often we find that product, design or supplier performance assessments are incomplete and not fully represented by key contributors. Consequently, quality time is not created to reflect, to derive insights that will instruct, guide or change policy.

Essential business values can promote or impede feedback. Evaluating and learning from risks that have been taken is becoming fundamental in new business development; the search for blame or the scapegoat within flawed decisions will cut across the learning cycle, and in turn, impair the generation of new ideas and initiatives.

Consistent performance and tension

We have learned that organizational behavior can both sustain or unhinge the learning organization.

Consistency creates a virtuous circle of the learning continuum; we are looking for congruency from each of the cells of our model and within our real life organization. Specifically, we are looking for targets that motivate, values that empower, teams that are rewarded and recognized.

The corollary is also true: inconsistency creates a vicious circle of learning discontinuity; the leader who does not live the values of investing in learning, the reward system that is under funded or the 'prima donna' manager who is allowed to not participate or share expertise. These could be a temporary aberration--or a permanent barrier.

If we examine leads and lags in the completeness of each cell in our model, we can also understand the tensions that can be created. Many knowledge management projects have started with goals being set, a team being formed and motivated, but committing to agree values later. Such teams can progress only so far before they grind to a halt because misaligned values reduce collaboration. Indeed, collaboration across part of an organization may far exceed the stated values of the total business; yet even this can lead to competition, conflict and delay.

Challenges

Perhaps everyone can pinpoint examples, no matter how small, of where the attributes of our model are in place and where truly exceptional results are being achieved.

Scale is a challenge, but a simple process that works for a smaller organization or department can work for a larger one. The greater challenge is repeatability; that is, once we get it right, ensuring we continue to deliver excellent results consistently, again and again. Assuring repeatability and in assessing the impact and benefit from selective deployment of learning capability have become the most critical elements of the client-vendor relationship.

Just as we know such success is delivered against a backdrop of constant turbulence in the race to stay ahead, we also know successful managers move on, teams are dissipated by promotion and group motivation is hard to keep on the same high. But our model does not become irrelevant over time. Instead, it shows a renewed poignancy, because truly successful (enduring) organizations are relentless in sustaining these principles.

[Howard Rowley is a change management consultant with Xansa (www.xansa.com), offers specialized industry expertise and proven technology skills to help companies manage business change to support new and emerging needs.]

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