Chapter 54
Recognising Influences on Attitudes to Knowledge Sharing in a Research Establishment:
An Interpretivist Investigation

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge sharing in organizations is influenced by several interconnecting factors, but there is little written on the individual perspective of those involved in sharing. An interpretivist, action research methodology was used to help members of a research organization determine what knowledge means for them and the knowledge sharing issues they face. Their shared Appreciations were that although they believed "knowledge-as-practice" was an essential aspect of their work, it was undervalued by the organization's clients and fund-holders, causing difficulties for the maintenance of knowledge capability, and influencing organizational subcultures. These included a "you should know" subculture and a risk-averse subculture, where staff perceive that there is a tendency to assign blame rather than to accept and learn from errors. An officially mandated culture of knowledge sharing is subverted by these subcultures, affecting individuals' motivation to share their tacit knowledge, their self-efficacy and consequent sharing behaviours.

INTRODUCTION

The effective sharing of knowledge is a critical success factor for organizations (Nonaka, 1994, p.14; Calantone et al., 2002, p.515). The discipline of knowledge management has privileged particular views of what organizational knowledge is, treating it as an asset or "content" (Hislop, 2005, p.14). The importance of exchange of tacit knowledge between individuals has been increasingly recognised and, latterly, the growth of collaboration in social networks (Dixon, 2010, p.144). In not sufficiently recognising the subjectivity of human experience, however, existing models of knowledge and knowledge sharing in organizations are deficient in explaining what knowledge

means to those working with it, how knowledge sharing happens in practice and what influences its effectiveness.

This paper attempts to justify the exploration of knowledge sharing from an interpretivist perspective, and proposes the Appreciative Inquiry Method as a means of investigation particularly suited to discovering knowledge sharing's subjective aspects. The method was tested in a field study carried out in a research organization, where its use helped participants realise the influences on their individual practice of knowledge sharing.

Taxonomies of knowledge have been developed to capture its meaning from a variety of perspectives. For example, theoretical knowledge ("knowledge-that" or declarative knowledge) which relates to facts that are known, differs from practical knowledge ("knowledge-how" or procedural knowledge) that relates to the knowledge needed to perform a specific task (Ryle, 1949, pp.25-61). Explicit knowledge is that which can be articulated, codified and stored (Hislop, 2005). Tacit knowledge has been described as that which cannot be articulated -"we know more than we can tell" (Polanyi, 2009, p.4) - which is often not "known" consciously, and which is inculcated through practice or apprenticeship. Following Polanyi, Tsoukas (1996, p.14) suggests that explicit and tacit knowledge are mutually constituted: objective knowledge can only be made use of once it is appreciated subjectively, taking into account context, tacit knowledge, motivation, and the other aspects relating to human subjectivity, and "reattached to and embedded in the ongoing processes of the organisation" (Spender, 1996, p.64). The "generative dance", the interplay between explicit knowledge and tacit knowing, is said to be a source of innovation for the organization (Cook & Brown, 1999, p.381). Knowledge-as-practice recognises the translation of cognition into practice, for effective action (Spender, 2007, in Spender 2009, p.164). This last includes subjective qualities such as the importance of context and tacit understanding: "Practice is richer and more complex than

the mere execution of cognition, and cannot be theorized within a framework of rationality and goal-seeking" (Spender, 2009, p.164).

In the interpretivist tradition this perspective is accommodated by viewing knowledge as humanly constructed, involving cognitive and behavioural elements, existing as a "justified true belief" in the mind of the individual, based on meaningful accumulation of information through experience, communication, inference (Dretske, 1983, p.55). Knowledge is seen as subjective, dependent on context and interpretation by those engaged in it. For Nonaka (1994), organizational knowledge concerns "beliefs, commitment, perspectives, intention and action". This opens the possibility of examining human activity systems from the inside, and relations within organizations (Huber, 1991, in Spender, 1996, p.63).

FACTORS IN KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Knowledge sharing in organizations enables members to benefit from each other's knowledge and expertise, allowing them to contribute ideas and experience (Ipe, 2003, p.338; Hansen et al., 2005, p.776). Organizational culture and structure, management support and incentives have all been found to influence the likelihood of employees to engage in knowledge sharing. Examples are given of breaking down silos within the organization, encouraging inter-team communication (Tsai, 2002, p.188), providing time and resources for knowledge sharing, and correctly structuring tangible and intangible reward mechanisms (Dyer and Nobeoka, 2002). Motivations for sharing knowledge can be examined in terms of impression management and power, social costs, the experience of learning and evaluation apprehension (Wang & Noe, 2010, p.124).

Knowledge sharing literature exploring the individual perspective focuses on the social and psychological drivers which influence knowledge

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