Chapter 4
Organizational Social Context:
The Foundation of Tacit Knowledge Management

Albert J. Simard
Integrated Knowledge Strategies, Canada

ABSTRACT

Understanding the social context of an organization is a precursor to managing tacit knowledge. This chapter describes a three-dimensional social-context framework comprising factors, trust, and manage-ability. Factors are underlying characteristics - situation, interaction, and scale - that affect all aspects of the social structure. Trust classifies criteria that affect trust at individual, group, and organizational levels. Manageability lists methods of enhancing indicators for each social context criteria. The frame-work is based on patterns and clusters of 1200 terms found in a survey of the social-science literature related to social structures. The framework is presented in a format that facilitates prioritizing the most important criteria for an organization to focus on. Understanding how social context affects organiza-tions will greatly facilitate tacit knowledge management.

INTRODUCTION

Tacit knowledge exists in individual minds, group memory, and organizational culture. However, tacit knowledge has only potential value to an organization. To realize its actual value, tacit knowl-edge must flow from where it exists to where it is used to achieve organizational objectives. As an ephemeral human entity, tacit knowledge flows through social interactions between individu-als, within groups, and across the organization. Social interactions are mutual, joint, or reciprocal action, activity, or influence between two or more individuals, groups, or organizations that take place within a social context.

Simard (2013) structured social interaction as a four-quadrant framework (Figure 1). The left axis represents participant interests and the bottom axis represents goals. The four quadrants are sharing (autonomous interests, compatible goals), collaboration (mutual interests, compatible goals), negotiation (mutual interests, conflicting goals), and competition (autonomous interests,

Figure 1. Social interaction framework (Simard 2013)
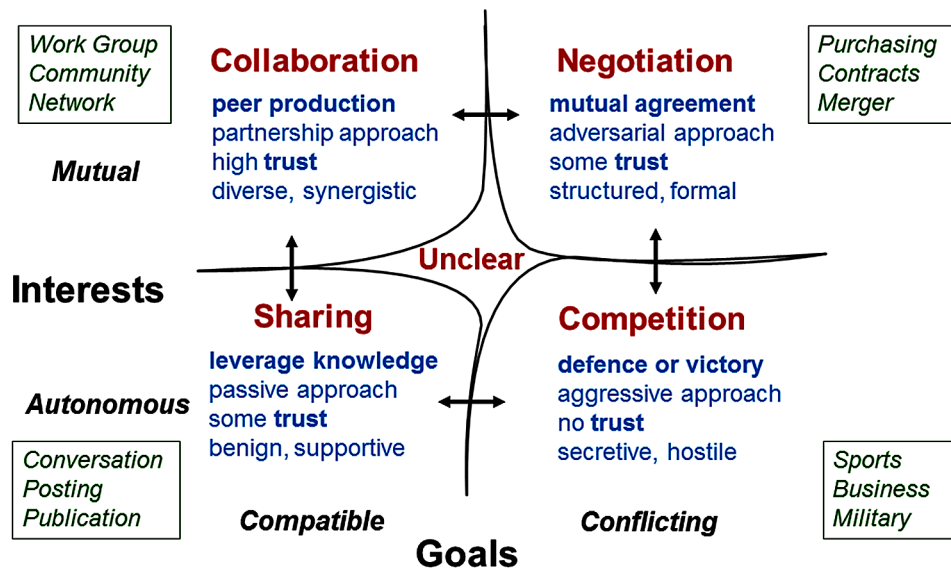
conflicting goals). Selected attributes and examples of activities associated with each quadrant are shown in figure 1. This framework is a mirror image of the sense-making framework described by Snowden and Kurtz (2003). The best quadrant for social interaction is collaboration (win/win) while the worst is competition (loose/loose) with sharing and negotiation lying somewhere in between the best and worst. The social context framework described in this chapter is tailored to the social interaction framework.

Organizational social context is the environment of human attitudes, interpersonal relationships, and organizational culture that influences, affects, or determines individual behavior, group dynamics, and social norms, respectively[1]. A positive social context promotes and enhances creativity, synergy, and learning by engaging individuals, providing a creative environment, building trust, and fostering positive relationships. Conversely, a negative social context limits and restricts all of the preceding by disengaging individuals, creating a controlled environment, fermenting mistrust, and permitting adversarial relationships.

Organizational social context strongly affects every aspect of organizational activity, work, and business. Understanding and working within an existing social context is not only key to successful tacit knowledge management, but also central to business success. Alternatively, if the existing social context is not conducive to effective knowledge work, understanding how the former affects the latter is prerequisite to evolving in a desired direction. All the technology and processes in the world, by themselves, are but a shell, realizing only a fraction of their potential value to an organization. Technology is used by individuals, groups, and the organization to leverage the value of existing knowledge and increase the productivity of knowledge work – both of which are fundamentally human processes. Social context tends to be in the background, buried in attitudes, motivations, and beliefs that may not be apparent on the surface. Social context is difficult to evaluate and even more difficult to change. From a practical perspective, we are limited to affecting observable behaviors and practices rather than changing underlying psychological drivers.

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