

Chapter I

Knowledge Management: From Management Fad to Systemic Change

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ABSTRACT

This chapter demonstrates that despite a plurality of discourses related to knowledge, they are reduced to a single dominant discourse on knowledge management. It draws on systems thinking and complexity theory to reconceptualise organisations as complex adaptive systems within which knowledge ecologies may flourish. The focus thus shifts to knowing in situated action and on knowledge as a dynamic phenomenon. The chapter makes a contribution to strengthening the impact of the epistemology of action and that of a social-process perspective of knowledge. The approach presented has radical implications for knowledge management such that it becomes an enduring organisational intervention as opposed to a management fad. The implications for organisational practice and changes in managerial orientations are shown to be novel offering significant potential towards a second order knowledge management.

“If a system is behaving badly, consistently over a long period of time, and in spite of many variations in surrounding conditions, then something more than marginal tinkering is required to bring about improvement. Something within the system itself must change, to a new structure that brings forth a new behaviour.”

—Meadows and Robinson (2002, p. 291)

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge management (KM) is increasingly becoming regarded as crucial to an organisation's success. I shall argue in this chapter that this may only be the case under certain conditions. If these conditions are not met knowledge management loses its promise and is reduced to a management fad. They require a change in assumptions as well as a particular set of managerial orientations. This in turn naturally has significance for organisational culture, change management and the roles of various organisational actors ranging from executives, managers and professionals to practitioners.

This chapter first summarises the major discourses around knowledge (Spender, 1996) and then considers how these translate into a dominant discourse on knowledge management. Second, it explores the set of assumptions that underpin conventional approaches to knowledge management which are based on this dominant discourse. These assumptions lead to what may be termed *first order* knowledge management that views knowledge as static and reified. First order knowledge management is characterised by a positivist approach that is based on an epistemology of possession (Assudani, 2005; Cook & Brown, 1999) or a perspective referred to as cognitive-possession (Chiva & Alegre, 2005). The chapter then draws on constructs from systems thinking and complexity theory to question the assumptions of first order knowledge management and to show how it is likely to be reduced to a management fad. Systems thinking highlights the importance of holism, worldview, boundary determinations,

synthesis, positive and negative feedback, balancing and reinforcing behaviour, relationship between systems structure and behaviour, generic behaviours that replicate across organisational processes and the distinction between short term and long term impacts. Complexity theory complements the perspectives of systems thinking by introducing the notions of nonlinear dynamics, fitness landscapes, co-evolution and co-creation, self-organising behaviour, as well as accentuating the phenomenon of emergence in organisations characterised by social complexity.

Collectively these perspectives enrich the intellectual armour that may be brought to bear on knowledge management by professionals, researchers and practitioners. This call on systems thinking and complexity theory is a way of reflecting how the plurality of discourses on knowledge may be translated into a more pluralistic discourse on knowledge management itself. The contribution of this chapter is an attempt to strengthen the impact of the epistemology of action (Assudani, 2005; Cook & Brown, 1999) and that of a social-process perspective of knowledge (Chiva & Alegre, 2005) on knowledge management.

The shift in focus based on systems thinking and complexity theory results in conceptualising the organisation as a complex adaptive system. Within such a conceptualisation, one refers to knowledge ecologies that are dynamic, self-organising and adaptive. This has radical implications for both strategy and knowledge management. Alignment between business and knowledge management strategies may not simply be designed and imposed, but may only be stimulated, through managing organisational context and

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