

Chapter 45

Introducing Knowledge Management as Both Desirable and Undesirable Processes

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INTRODUCTION

Knowledge management (KM), as a topic for academic research and practical implementation, has had a short history dating back only to the early 1990s. Due to knowledge management's recent debut as we know it, it is not surprising that much of the writing and research on the subject is controversial. In this article we note the need of a critical awareness of desirable and undesirable shades of knowledge management processes (Land, Nolas, & Amjad, 2005).

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BACKGROUND AND FOCUS

Knowledge is both disseminated and acquired. As observers we can never fully know what intentions lay behind the act of dissemination, or what motivates the acquirer to acquire. We cannot blindly assume information—a major component of knowledge—as interpreted, facilitated, conceptualised, or experienced, is automatically for everyone's benefit. The process of knowledge management may have a desirable or detrimental outcome for society, an organisation, a team, or the individual. Indeed, the outcome of a KM activity, say knowledge sharing, is largely unpredictable. The reality is the outcome may benefit one group at the expense of another. Benefiting one group at the expense of the other is addressed by the following conceptual fusions.

KM is a continuum of desirable and undesirable political processes. This article suggests that the combined concepts of *knowledge management*, organisational politics (OP), and coevolution (CE) make a contribution to the understanding of KM, whether in its benign or its darker manifestation. Because knowledge management is a purposeful activity, it can never be neutral. Hence the article sets out to forewarn practitioners and thinkers in the area of KM that care must be taken since knowledge (K) can be manipulated for both altruistic and selfish purposes.

If the study of KM is to have an enduring future, it must take a more holistic stance. We suggest the concept of “coevolution” (McKelvey, 2002; Lewin & Volberda, 1999; Lewin et al., 1999) provides a way of understanding the implications of knowledge management on the organisation and its employees. Coevolution describes how an action, activity or event will stimulate responses and activities amongst actors with each activity stimulating further responses both amongst the actors involved, but also beyond them to the general environment. Such mutual influences can have desirable and undesirable, constructive and destructive effects. In the case of an organisation, coevolution can be envisaged as being effected in a set of multi-dimensional networks, themselves part of a larger set of networks to which they are linked.

Any event or activity will have some (possibly unknown) impact on other succeeding or collateral activities. Some of these impacts will have highly improbable outcomes with unknowable consequences which Taleb characterises as Black Swans (Taleb, 2007). Their responses will in turn trigger impacts and responses in further activities, including possibly in the activity that acted as the initial trigger. Each activity evolves on a trajectory which may have been planned, but the outcome and direction is often unexpected. The pattern of responses in diverse activities leads to their *coevolution*. The coevolution of *power* and knowledge contribute to the discussion of

the darker sides of knowledge management by offering an understanding of *shades of desirable and undesirable forms of knowledge management*. The concept of coevolution permits us to replace the simple ethical/non-ethical dichotomy and attempts to explain the dynamics in a continuum of knowledge management processes, actuated by motives, mediated by sources, and realised via the dissemination and acquisition of knowledge. Nevertheless, the complex pattern woven by coevolution remains uncertain, and permits the *emergence* of the unexpected.

KM occurs at all levels in the organisation. It may be a planned formal process supported by KM software designed to increase the effectiveness of a team of knowledge workers. Equally it may be a hidden process of *knowledge manipulation* by a group attempting to direct the organisation on a path away from its formal objectives. It may be an informal process, the reaction of a group of people responding to an initiative they believe will damage them. But whatever the intention behind the process, both the study of *organisational politics* and co-evolution suggest that the outcome will be uncertain. Outcomes, sometimes unexpected, emerge from the responses of organisational actors. In order to deal with the problem of uncertainty and emergence, at both an analytical and practical level, the article introduces the concepts of *desirable* and *undesirable coevolution* for looking at what *is* and not what *ought* to be.

CORE IDEAS OF THE ARTICLE

Knowledge, Power, and Their Dynamic Interactions

This article links together:

- Knowledge Management (KM)
- Organisational Politics (OP) and
- The Concept of Coevolution (CE)

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