Chapter 88
Knowledge Sharing Between Individuals

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Category: Organizational and Social Aspects of Knowledge Management

INTRODUCTION

As Peter Drucker (2000) has pointed out, the foundation of the 21st century organization is no longer money or capital or even technology; it is knowledge. In order for that knowledge to create value, it must be shared. Some discussions of knowledge sharing in organizations and, indeed, some knowledge management initiatives seem to assume that given the right technology and/or the proper culture, knowledge will flow readily throughout the firm. Technologies that facilitate knowledge sharing (e.g., databases, intranets, and groupware) currently exist and are constantly improving. But technologies are only part of the knowledge management equation.

In 1997, the Ernst and Young Center for Business Innovation conducted a study of 431 U.S. and European organizations (Ruggles, 1998). Of those responding, only 13% rated their organizations as good or excellent at sharing knowledge internally. Even when knowledge was accessible, only 30% reported that their organizations were good or excellent at using that knowledge in making decisions. When asked what was the biggest obstacle to knowledge sharing within their organizations, 54% cited culture. To understand knowledge sharing within an organization, we must look beyond culture and start with the individual.

BACKGROUND

There has been much written about defining, creating, assessing, and changing organizational culture. In most of these writings, the focus has been the organization as a whole (e.g., Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Schein, 1999) or its subdivisions (e.g., Sackmann, 1992). The focus has not been on the individual or on knowledge sharing.

What exactly do we mean by knowledge sharing? There are numerous definitions of knowledge ranging from the pragmatic to the philosophical.

We shall adopt a definition based on Turban (1992) that knowledge is information that has been organized and analyzed to convey understanding, experience, learning, and expertise so that it is understandable and applicable to problem solving or decision making. Although knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer are often used interchangeably, we shall make a distinction between them. Knowledge sharing as used here refers to an exchange of knowledge between two individuals: one who communicates knowledge and one who assimilates it. Knowledge sharing focuses on human capital and the interaction of individuals. Knowledge transfer focuses on structural capital and the transformation of individual knowledge to group or organizational knowledge, which becomes built into processes, products, and services. Strictly speaking, knowledge can never be shared. Because knowledge exists in a context, the receiver interprets it in light of his or her own background.

Several authors have looked at the organizational factors that inhibit the sharing of knowledge. Believing that most people "have a natural desire…to share what they know," O'Dell and Grayson (1998, p. 16) attribute the lack of internal knowledge sharing in organizations to "a set of organizational structures, management practices, and measurement systems that *discourage*-rather than encourage-sharing" (p. 17). Szulanski (1996, 2003) identifies four sets of factors that determine how readily knowledge will be shared within the firm: the characteristics of knowledge, the characteristics of the source, the characteristics of the recipient, and the organizational context. Hubert Saint-Onge, chief executive officer (CEO) of Konverge Digital Solutions Corp, offers a different explanation for the lack of knowledge sharing: "Sharing knowledge is an unnatural act. You can't just stand up and say 'Thou shalt share knowledge'-it won't work" (as cited in Paul, 2003).

E. von Hippel (1994) coined the phrase "sticky information" to describe "the incremental expenditure required to transfer that unit of information to a specified locus in a form usable by a given information seeker" (p. 430). The higher the incremental expenditure, the stickier the information is. Stickiness may be an attribute of the information itself, or it may refer to attributes and choices made by someone seeking information or by someone providing it.

If we are to understand knowledge sharing, we must examine what happens at the level of the individuals who are at the core of the knowledge sharing process. Maslow's (1987) hierarchy of needs provides one widely accepted explanation of the behavior and attitudes of individuals in organizations. Maslow identified five levels of human needs: physiological (e.g., food, water), safety (e.g., security, protection), social (e.g., love, affection, sense of belonging), esteem (e.g., respect and recognition from others, personal sense of competence), and self-actualization (e.g., fulfillment of one's potential). According to Maslow, an unsatisfied need motivates behavior. Because these five needs exist in a hierarchy, a lower level need must be satisfied before the next higher level need is activated until the highest level, self-actualization, is reached. The more the self-actualization need is satisfied, the stronger it grows. Although there may be a variety of ways to satisfy a need, individuals can be expected to engage in knowledge sharing behaviors to the extent that they perceive that knowledge sharing leads to the satisfaction of a need.

Shannon and Weaver (1949) provide us with a transmission model of communication. Their model consists of six basic elements: the source, encoder, message, channel, decoder, and receiver. Although this model is often referred to in explaining human communication, it was actually designed for information theory and cybernetics, and is therefore technologically oriented. As a result, it does not address factors that can affect human communication, such as the context of the communication or the content of the message itself. Nevertheless, it provides insight into the

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