

Knowledge Management

The other day at a conference I met a Chief Ideas Officer. Later that same day I talked with a Head of Knowledge. Both of these people – nice guys to say hello to – were under the impression that it was their duty to capture, process and disseminate knowledge around their businesses.

To make this process happen they had assembled staff and a wide variety of complex technology (hard and soft). The intention was clear; by embracing the concept of knowledge management (KM) they would give their firm a competitive lead. Why? Because capturing, assessing, stockpiling and sharing knowledge would, they surmised, create an arsenal of ideas – a veritable cornucopia of stuff - that by being loaded, coded, filed and filtered would bring untold benefits to its users.

Later, on the plane going home, I got to thinking about KM and its devotees (the high priests of this intelligence initiative) and just what did they think they were trying to do? You see, I am an old fashioned kind of manager. And I think that knowledge belongs to everyone all the time. I don't think you can hunt it and trap it and put it in a box (even an electronic box) until you need it.

That – sadly – is at the heart of the KM thing; technology has given us the ability to capture vast quantities of data. The misguided amongst us call it knowledge, when it is in fact just information. Just because computers are everywhere, people think they can be used to “manage” the most subtle of human activities – inspiration, imagination and the creation of knowledge.

Certainly information needs classifying and codifying and this can be stored and searched, but to call it knowledge management, totally demeans the term ‘knowledge’, demoting it to another one of those assets to be directed through a spreadsheet cell. Knowledge creation should be rich, vibrant and dynamic: tell me when any corporate IT system, or paper-based system encouraged this?

But, more importantly, I believe that this type of process based KM is dangerous in corporations for three BIG reasons:

- It creates and reinforces an exclusivity that it should not have
- It stifles innovation and creativity
- It discourages a sharing culture

It creates an exclusivity: Surely there should not be an exclusivity to the management of knowledge. But by putting labels on people and creating departments of knowledge management, we are – in essence – ring-fencing the knowledge opportunity. What it does is send a big message to the rest of the organisation, “hey we do the knowledge stuff around here, stay out”. I just don't think that businesses that seem to want to compartmentalise knowledge realise what they are doing. Making the KM process a formal thing shuts out employees and creates an elitism that is the antithesis of getting knowledge to move around a business.

Stifles innovation and creativity: If it is someone's job to manage knowledge then why would anyone else bother. “We've got a KM manager, so let them get on with this.” Why can't we just allow

every employee to be creative, why put up barriers to innovation and knowledge?

Discourages a sharing culture: You bet it does! If you put labels on the knowledge process you trap it in one place and make it difficult for others to participate. Sadly, our smart employees know only too well that knowledge is power and their view is, “well if you don't want me to take part I'll keep my knowledge to myself”. This is not the way to build an open culture where ideas and information flow naturally and are shared; where knowledge is passed on as part of the ongoing process of a business.

Make the knowledge management system too formal, stick all those labels on it and you will stifle knowledge and it will no longer be a vibrant, living thing.

Looking around me at current corporate thinking and it seems that the KM professional feels secure and satisfied if he or she can say, “it's all here in a database” but if you think about that for a while, that is a bit like answering the question of “where's my dinner?” with the response ‘it's dispersed around the kitchen cupboards, but here's a list of where you can find the ingredients.’

Just-in-time knowledge doesn't exist. Just-in-time information does, and it is very useful in the complex world we occupy ... but knowledge it ain't! KM – as a systematised process – belongs in the garbage, along with many other once touted corporate panaceas that promised to capture the richness and unpredictability of our thoughts.

Recent surveys have pointed to three critical factors that managers still get wrong in dealing with their (increasingly) smart workforces. Strangely, they all have to do with knowledge in one way or another. But not the knowledge that comes from some formalised process, but from a real understanding of how people function in 21st century business. These three factors are:

- **Talk to me:** tell me what is going on
- **Listen to me:** I know stuff too, but you don't bother
- **STOP doing things:** they get in the way of me doing my job well

Talk to me, means just that – share. Tell the truth, be honest, let us employees know where we are going and why and what it is going to take to get there. In other words, share the knowledge that we need to do our jobs well.

Listen to me, because I want to contribute, want to talk to you and want you to listen. Believe it or not, it's called sharing knowledge.

STOP doing things, you actually get in the way of me doing my job and sharing my ideas with my co-workers. This one IS important. I often ask managers to stop for five minutes and write down all the things they do that get in the way of their staff doing a good job (including talking to each other!). Most are surprised how many no-no's they come up with. Ending negative practices can only contribute to the flow of real knowledge around a business.

Knowledge management isn't about processes and systems, it is about people sharing, advising, counselling and mentoring – not because they are told to, but because they WANT to. But it is an evolving knowledge culture that does that, not a set of rules or a fancy title on some vice president. Capture as much information as you like, but leave the management of knowledge to the people who know – the employees.

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