



Knowledge Management and Leadership

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Abstract:

One of the great challenges for knowledge managers is to demand efforts from their colleagues without being their superior and thus without having the formal authority. For example, as a knowledge manager you must be able to persuade people to contribute and share their knowledge for the benefit of not only themselves and their department but for the whole organization. This means special methods when it comes to leadership.

It also means that the role of the knowledge manager is rather like a consultant's role. You need to work in close connection with your colleagues and make sure that they understand and are in favour of the decisions made. Otherwise not much will happen. At the same time you need of course to have the ear and support of the top management.

This paper addresses these issues and the examples are fetched from my many years of experience working as global technology intelligence process owner at Tetra Pak and from 2004 in my own firm I.C. at Once.

Is it possible to manage knowledge or is it like trying to manage a herd of cats. There are arguments for and against knowledge management but still it has succeeded in surviving for quite a few years. It has proven to have qualities and not only being the buzz-word that some of us suspected when we first heard it. Knowledge management is since the beginning of 90-ties an established discipline. Wikipedia defines knowledge management as “a range of strategies and practices used in an organization to identify, create, represent, distribute, and enable adoption of insights and experiences. Such insights and

experiences comprise knowledge, either embodied in individuals or embedded in organizational processes or practice.”¹

This lecture is about the leadership challenges when leading knowledge management projects, but first I want to illustrate some of the challenges of knowledge management in general with Choo’s splendid application on knowledge management of the Johari windows.²

The windows of knowledge management in an organisation are:

- *You know what you know.* This is a good for knowledge management, but however rare except for in small organisations. You can always improve conditions by working with facilitating access and knowledge sharing over time.
- *You know what you don’t know.* This is not so bad. You have some gaps in information and knowledge but you are aware of them. Focused seeking after information and knowledge can narrow the gaps.
- *You don’t know what you know.* This is a very common phenomenon especially in large organisations. Facilitating knowledge sharing by different means is essential.
- *You don’t know what you don’t know.* A difficult but not uncommon situation. A broad and open information and knowledge scanning both internally and externally is needed. Facilitating knowledge sharing is a must, but also to stimulate the surveillance of the external world for information and knowledge that can affect your business.

Embedded in these windows are some challenges for the knowledge manager. There are also a lot of other challenges as well, for example

Hierarchical organisations. If the organisation is very hierarchical knowledge and information is expected to flow through the formal line organisation. The managers should be the ones to be first informed and to decide to whom to share the information.

Corporate culture and models for economic control. If the organisation is built on internal competition between departments or companies within the corporation, the flow of information and knowledge across departmental boundaries often is inhibited. One example of this is a consultant firm where the different business areas were different profit units. The organisation had identified that knowledge sharing needed to be improved and engaged some students to investigate the knowledge sharing behaviour. The result pointed out that the different business areas did not benefit from sharing their knowledge with other business areas. On the contrary such behaviour could lower their bonus and profit. Under such circumstances it was no surprise that the wanted behaviour failed to appear.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knowledge_management (accessed 2010-04-21)

² Chun Wei Choo: Information management for the intelligent organization, 3rd ed., Information Today, 2002, p. 261

Measurements. A great challenge is to be able to measure the eventual benefits from knowledge management. How do you know that your increases in turnover and profit or cost savings emanate from qualified knowledge management? The link between these factors is not very straightforward.

Short term – long term. It is often difficult for individuals to find time for the extra efforts that could be required to accomplish a good flow of information and knowledge in the organisation when customers, clients or colleagues are screaming for work to be done and deadlines to be met. It is the eternal dilemma to match the short term and the long term commitments. For an organisation pressure to produce quarterly results could be a hindrance to more long term thinking and acting.

Facilitating factors are if the culture climate in the organisation is open and that free discussions are encouraged. Informal meeting places, possibilities to explore new areas, job rotation are examples of activities that facilitate knowledge management. If knowledge management is built in the normal working processes, for example in product development cycles or market plan instructions, the managing of knowledge is very much facilitated. A simple and straightforward IT-system/Intranet as a place to share and keep information is necessary.

As a knowledge manager you have several roles in the organisation. The roles could be consultant and advisor, teacher and trainer, networker, marketer and/or leader. The roles will typically not be explicitly defined leaving much space for own initiatives.

When driving knowledge management projects you often work for the whole organisation across department and other boundaries. Like other project managers, you are not the formal manager, the boss, for the people involved. Ordinary management means like promotion, raised salary etc. (or lack of them) is therefore not applicable. The challenges lies in that you will have to put demands on your colleagues to contribute for the benefit of the whole organisation and to share their knowledge and information in more formal ways (e.g. write it down) which they are not always very fond of. In order to get people to contribute they need to know what's in it for them. To collect and highlight good examples for concrete situations where knowledge management best practice has been of value not only or the whole organisation but for individuals could be one way to do it. Acknowledgement of good efforts is important; giving individuals credit for what they do is appreciated. Some organisations have even tried to reward knowledge sharing activities with money, but with less success.

Another challenge is that in large organisations the knowledge manager might not know the key persons for the success of knowledge management projects very well. As the leadership is very much facilitated by networking and personal relations, one important activity for the knowledge manager is therefore to talk to and visit the key persons to include them in the informal or formal network.

A knowledge manager could never do the job alone, she or he needs support from other managers on all levels. Special promoting and training in knowledge management activities should be directed towards managers with the aim to making them knowledge management ambassadors. No matter what the knowledge manager does and says – without the other managers leaving the same message and acting the same way, it will be extremely difficult to get good results.

At last the most important as a knowledge manager is to be able to motivate and inspire. In order to do that you must yourself believe in what you do and the benefits your contribution makes to the organisation.

About Margareta Nelke and I.C. at Once

I graduated from Swedish School of Library and Information Science in 1982 and took a Diploma in Marketing Management 1990. Between 1983 and 2003 I worked as the Library manager, Technology Intelligence manager and since 2002 as the Global Process Owner for Technology Intelligence at Tetra Pak. 2003 I started the consultant firm I.C. at Once specializing on methods for and training in competitive intelligence, strategic business development for libraries and information centers, and investigations of different kinds in the area of information provision and management.

2006-2009 I was the president of Swedish Association for Information Specialists. 2002 I was appointed European Special Librarian of the Year 2002.

Besides lectures and articles I have published “Knowledge management in Swedish corporations. The value of information and information services” 1998 and “Bevaka din omvärld” 2006 (about how to do organised competitive intelligence).