

Managing the Corporate Zoo: A Knowledge Management Perspective

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Abstract: This paper presents a 2x2 matrix which focuses on individual knowledge and knowledge sharing. There is a vast amount of literature that has acknowledged that the management of knowledge is an important strategic and tactical approach to improve organizational performance. Knowledge sharing between individuals in an organization has also been recognized as a sound strategy to increase the value of the knowledge within a firm. The model presented in this paper proposes a typology of individuals that contributes to the literature both from an academic as well as a practitioner perspective; it extends the literature on knowledge management, and provides suggestions on how to aid individuals adopt a more desirable behavior that is conducive to firm survival.

Keywords: Knowledge, knowledge management, knowledge sharing, employee classification

1. Introduction

At a weekly meeting, we are all too familiar with that individual who seems to talk a lot, to constantly bring up lots of ideas, but as we head back to our office, if we really think of what that colleague contributed, we most often come up short-handed. How about that other colleague who seems to stick around a lot, who listens attentively, but when you really think of it, how much did that person contribute? Though they may never really give their two-cents worth, you can't help but think: although they made no contribution, what ideas did they get from all of us who were discussing openly? Wouldn't corporate life be better with fewer of these types of individuals?

In the short scenario above, what is it that bothers us? Most likely it is that these individuals contribute neither to the knowledge nor to the learning of the firm; contributing translates into the survival of the firm. Knowledge is a firm's most valuable resource (Grover & Davenport 2001; Kogut & Zander 1992; Nonaka 1994), a resource that is created, rather than given or discovered (Tsoukas 1996). Knowledge in an organisational context stems from people; the concept of organisational knowledge is a metaphor because it is not the organisation but the people in the organisation who create knowledge (Bhatt 2000; Grover & Davenport 2001). The role of management is to coordinate purposeful individuals who can apply their knowledge in a specific situation. In this paper, we present a typology that focuses on individual

knowledge and knowledge sharing. Following the presentation of the typology, suggestions on how to help individuals adopt a more desirable behaviour that is conducive to firm survival are provided.

Although there are many different definitions of knowledge management (KM) (for e.g., Alavi & Leidner 1999; King 1999), what they have in common is their focus on organisations and the people who make up the organisations. These definitions emphasise that the organisation plays a critical role in the knowledge management process (Shin, Holden & Schmidt 2001); however, the knowledge itself is developed by individuals, and although many people know pieces of information, no one knows it all (Stauffer 1999). What accelerates the creation of ideas are the interactions between individuals, and these interactions occur in an organisation whose role is to support creative individuals and provide an environment that can articulate and amplify that knowledge (Nonaka 1994). Information can be generated by computers and technology; knowledge is created by people (Coleman 1998). In other words, the emphasis in KM is on people, not technology (King 1999; Remez 1999). For KM to be successful, organisations need to create a corporate culture that promotes and encourages collaboration and rewards individuals who contribute and share their knowledge (Costa 1999). Knowledge creation, which takes place through knowledge sharing, is critical for a company because through this process creative ideas can be

translated into innovative technologies and processes (Grant 1996; Sumner 1999).

For firms to survive, both in the short- and long-term, they need to reuse existing knowledge and they need to be innovative (March 1991). Although innovation often seems enticing to firms, if a firm engages only in innovation, it is likely to incur costs from the innovation process while not gaining from its benefits. Following only an innovation strategy would lead the firm to have many underdeveloped ideas that do not get followed through. If, on the other hand, organisations only support knowledge reuse, they will most likely survive in the short-term but will not be able to sustain survival (March 1991). Old ideas only go so far. In fact, these old ideas can be likened to mirages that appear in the desert: they seem to promise a source of water and cool shelter, but at the end of the day all that surrounds you is the desert. Just as this mirage seemed so promising, so is the reuse strategy for long-term survival illusory.

Firms need to maintain a proper balance between innovation and knowledge reuse in order to survive (March 1991). However, innovation and knowledge reuse compete for the same scarce resources. The people in the organisation represent a large part of those resources. To support innovation and knowledge reuse, individuals in a firm need to communicate and share what they know. Therefore, in considering the individuals that make up a firm, the employees, it is possible to categorise them according to their knowledge sharing behaviour and the extent of their knowledge, their competence (Ducikova & Everard 2002) (see Figure 1).

		Knowledge	
		High	Low
Knowledge Sharing	High	Seeing eye dogs	Peacocks
	Low	Foxes	Ants

Figure 1: The Employee Typology (ET)

2. The Employee Typology

The first dimension represented in the Employee Typology is knowledge. Knowledge is operationalised as competence as in Bassellier et al. (2001), Covey (2000) and Sandberg (2000).

Individuals can be categorised into one of two groups, those with high competence and those with low competence. These are represented in the figure above as "high knowledge" and "low knowledge," respectively.

Much of an individual's experience, intelligence and overall competence resides in his or her head; as a result when an individual leaves a company, these attributes are lost. For this reason, the transfer of an individual's knowledge to other individuals is vital to the continuing successful performance of a firm. In order to ensure that knowledge is not lost, before an individual leaves a firm his or her knowledge needs to have been shared with at least one other individual in the firm.

With respect to the second dimension, an individual can be categorised as either "high knowledge sharing" or "low knowledge sharing." Individuals are classified as high knowledge sharers if they provide knowledge to others in the organisation. Low knowledge sharers are individuals who do not provide any knowledge to others. This category includes those who seek help, advice, and suggestions from others, but who do not provide knowledge to others. Let us look at the four cells depicted in the figure above in more detail.

2.1 Seeing eye dogs

Individuals in the upper left hand cell have knowledge and share it, and are identified as seeing eye dogs. Individuals who fall in this cell are of the greatest importance for an organisation. They are, in essence, the pillars of the organisation, which in turn give the organisation its knowledge-based advantage. An organisation that is made up mostly of individuals who fall in this cell is likely to be a firm with a culture that emphasises learning and teaching and that has knowledge-based advantages, which are not easily replicated by competitors. Seeing eye dogs are very important to the organisation because they are the innovators and play a major part in the long-term survival of the firm.

There are several examples of this type of individual, or groups of individuals, in both the academic and practitioner literature. For example, Stewart (2000) describes a technique launched at the consultant

company Viant. Top consultants from this firm are called off their work and for several months are placed in a position of “agitator.” The agitator’s or “project-catalyst’s” responsibility is to approach others who are working on specific projects and to give them advice, show examples of possible solutions, and so forth. The seeing eye dog analogy can also be found at Buckman Laboratories and the World Bank. The seeing eye dogs are those individuals who use storytelling, analogies, and metaphors to share their tacit knowledge. This technique allows the context of important information that was gained by individuals through their expertise to be established. Further, we can find the concept of seeing eye dogs at BP Amoco. Kent Greenes, head of knowledge management, says: “*knowledge guardians* constantly probe the unknown and bounce it off project teams to get them thinking about new ideas” (p.27) (Wah 1999). Similarly, at Ericsson seeing eye dogs are referred to as “knowledge brokers” and are responsible for tracking which problems are being dealt with in various offices and bringing together the people who are able to solve them. von Krogh, Nonaka & Ichijo (1997) introduce the notion of a knowledge activist as a knowledge sharer. They identify a knowledge activist as some individual, or some group or department, who takes on the particular responsibility of energising and coordinating knowledge creation efforts throughout the corporation. The authors identify people in organisations who can act as knowledge activists, for example, employees from R&D centers, strategists, or individuals from knowledge and technology transfer units. While these individuals are in positions that allow them to be easily identified as knowledge activists, the most efficient and effective knowledge activists are those based on assignments to that role (von Krogh et al. 1997). Such an assigned position is in line with the definition of an “agitator” (Stewart 2000). It is important that those in the seeing eye dog position are rotated from time to time as this position entails a significant amount of mental exertion and thus requires new individuals to come in and renew the batch of ideas.

As can be seen from the above discussion, seeing eye dogs play a critical role in the performance of a company;

therefore firms that wish to be successful require this type of individual.

2.2 Ants

Individuals who have low knowledge and are not willing to share fall into the lower right hand cell of the matrix. Such individuals are able to use the explicit knowledge of others but their competence is unconscious (Covey 2000), that is, although they are able to perform certain processes or procedures, they are unable to make informed adjustments as to the performance of their tasks. Just as ants work hard at maintaining the proper functioning of the ecosystem, these individuals are essential to the organisation. Without them, routine tasks would not be performed and the everyday workings of the firm would come to a standstill.

During the hiring process, firms look to fill “ant” positions, for example call center employees, by individuals with qualifications such as basic reliability, problem-solving skills, and so forth (Jarvis 2000). These qualifications represent the top qualifications for such positions. Timeliness and responsibility are also required of such individuals for them to perform their duties properly. Schultz (1999) reports that a one percent error rate in basic business operations results in a ten percent increase in logistics’ costs. This is representative of the critical importance of ants in any organisation.

Since organisations often do not recognise the value of their work, ants are frequently compensated poorly. The work of ants is, in most cases, taken for granted until they fail to perform their responsibilities and tasks. It is then that the organisation comes to realise ants’ importance.

Ants play a significant role in the effective and efficient functioning of any firm. Therefore, in hiring ants, organisations must ensure that the individuals have the competence to adequately perform their tasks. If they fail to do so and do not pay enough attention in ensuring that individuals filling ant positions are qualified to do so, the organisation may suffer and the work of others may be negatively affected.

These two categories of individuals, seeing eye dogs and ants, can be mapped

onto the two desirable strategies for firm survival, innovation and knowledge reuse, respectively. Two other types of individuals with whom at some point in our working environment we have had most probably to deal and who were portrayed in the short scenario at the start of this article can be likened to foxes and peacocks. These types of individuals are discussed in the following paragraphs.

2.3 Foxes

The cell in the lower left hand side of the matrix represents individuals who have knowledge but who do not share it with others. Such individuals hoard their knowledge; this, however, does not preclude them from seeking knowledge from others. This behaviour is analogous to the behaviour of foxes – sly and crafty. Organisations need to be aware of individuals who fall into this cell as they represent a weak link and can lead to a knowledge breakdown in the organisation.

Even if self-determined and demand-driven mutual learning increases individuals' competence and flexibility (Hoffmann, Loser, Walter & Herrmann 1999), individuals are often resistant to share their knowledge. One of the reasons why people do not want to share their knowledge is because unique knowledge can be a source of power (Goodman & Darr 1999). According to Cook (1999) KM will suffer if knowledge is equated with power. As a result, individuals often choose to keep knowledge to themselves, to not share it; they keep it in store. One problem with this is that knowledge that is not used loses its value. This can be detrimental to an organisation's source of value, since the knowledge in the organisation is not used and therefore loses its timeliness value (Nonaka 1994).

Because much of a firm's intellectual capital is shared through informal networks, also known as the 'grapevine,' individuals who do not partake in such informal structures and relationships do not have access to the knowledge. In fact, an organisation's grapevine is a conduit through which skills and experience are easily and efficiently transferred and shared (Cook 1999).

2.4 Peacocks

Finally, individuals who fall in the upper right hand cell have low knowledge yet are willing to share. This is best represented by peacocks, which use their tail to inflate their size so as to appear larger and more powerful to would-be predators. In a similar manner, in some instances individuals who are less competent are willing to share whatever they do know in order to appear more competent than they actually are. Often this behavior backfires as the true level of competence of the individual is then exposed.

It is important for firms to recognise the "peacocks" among them. In some cases, the firm must even take precautions so as not to create peacocks, which can be done by not implementing reward systems based on the number of contributions by someone. When individuals are rewarded based on the quantity of contributions as opposed to the quality of contributions, they may tend to contribute for the sake of contributing. This behaviour, however, does not lead to an increase in an organisation's knowledge base.

3. Creating desirable behaviours

Although foxes and peacocks are less desirable to have in an organisation, to simply fire them is not a viable solution as the firm has already invested time and money in these individuals. Furthermore, the firm hired these people based on their expertise in a particular domain that is valuable to the firm, therefore making them potentially contributing forces of the firm. Foxes have the basis for innovative behaviour, as they possess much knowledge. Peacocks, on the other hand, have the potential to reuse existing knowledge.

The question that then arises is how to make seeing eye dogs and ants out of foxes and peacocks, respectively. This can be achieved by introducing changes in the environment that will lead to a change in behaviour of these individuals. Since we know that changes in the environment can lead to changes in behaviour, we now look at what can be done to enable foxes to become seeing eye dogs and peacocks to behave like ants.

3.1 From Fox to Seeing Eye Dog

If foxes, who possess knowledge, can be taught to share they then would become seeing eye dogs. In terms of knowledge that is operationalised as competence, foxes belong to the same category as seeing eye dogs. They possess the expertise and the creative thinking skills that are crucial to innovative behaviour. What they are lacking is the motivation to share. According to Amabile (1998) creative thinking skills, expertise and motivation lead to creativity, which in turn leads to innovation. While these three factors can be affected by workplace practices and conditions, motivation, however, is the easiest to influence by even subtle changes in a firm's environment.

For foxes to become seeing eye dogs, they need to be challenged yet feel free to approach a problem in their own way. For example, placing them in an environment where they are put in charge of providing a solution to a problem and for which they need to collaborate is one way of getting them out of the fox cell and helping them to act as seeing eye dogs. Fox-type individuals can be made to behave more like seeing eye dogs by making them responsible for more than one project at a time, by asking them to prepare more than one solution to a problem (this will boost their creative juices), by setting deadlines to challenge them, and by showing by way of example that everybody shares everything (Foster 2001).

3.2 From Peacocks to Ants

In terms of knowledge, peacocks belong to the same category as ants, and therefore have the potential to support the firm's short-term survival through knowledge reuse. From the initial blurb, peacocks are portrayed as individuals who make a lot of noise, who make sure they are noticed, who want to be recognised as innovative and knowledge sharing. However, they aim to be recognised for something that they are not and for which they lack the personal resources. The reason they behave in the manner they do is perhaps mainly to be noticed, to be recognised, to be heard. The root of the change in behaviour for the peacocks lies as with the foxes: in their motivation.

Peacocks feel a need to be heard and seen by those around them. Therefore, it is important to provide them opportunities where they can shine, where they feel a certain level of ownership in reusing knowledge in a new solution, where they feel valued and praised for their efforts (Foster 2001).

Although making seeing eye dogs out of foxes and ants out of peacocks may sound somewhat like an attempt at New Age Darwinism, by not attempting such an endeavor the costs may cause the demise of a firm. Innovation and knowledge reuse represent different strategies of firm survival, each equally important in nature. Each of these strategies also uses the same set of resources, namely the individuals in the firm. It is therefore imperative to address, no matter how subtly, the motivational needs of the different types of individuals in firms so as to support both innovation and knowledge reuse.

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