

Improving Public Sector Service Delivery through Knowledge Sharing

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INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of the first knowledge management article in *Harvard Business Review* (Nonaka, 1991), the world has witnessed a revolution in management practice. While the origins of knowledge management extend further back in history (see Prusak, 2001; Wiig, 1997), it is certainly true that in the last decade the creation, sharing and application of knowledge are increasingly seen as a source of competitive advantage. However, knowledge management is largely a private sector innovation at the present time, although gradually moving towards the public service sector (Bate & Robert, 2002; Hartley & Allison, 2002). The implementation of knowledge management places an emphasis on organizational factors such as learning capability, culture and leadership as well as renewed focus on the importance of information quality (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). The ability to manage the sharing of information (and hence knowledge) effectively remains one of the most important but still least understood activities in modern organizations, no less so in public services.

BACKGROUND: KNOWLEDGE SHARING IN CONTEMPORARY PARTNERSHIP ORGANIZATIONS

Public services represent a significant economic sector in most countries and public demands on services are increasingly consumerist. This has led to escalating scrutiny of the performance of public services. Consequently, the strategic use of information and knowledge to improve service delivery and financial performance has become a key skill for managers in this sector. Partnership working represents a formal departure from the traditional compartmentalized approach to public service delivery. Often referred to as joined-up thinking, partnership working challenges existing hierarchies, encouraging the partner organizations to work together at all levels, including strategy, service planning and service delivery to enhance efficiency and improve user experience and satisfaction. For partners to work effectively together, knowledge of best practices must be shared and

utilized towards the common goal of improving the overall quality of service delivery.

Our research has focused on health and social care as an area of public service in which organizations responsible for commissioning and delivering all aspects of care are increasingly expected to work together, to reduce fragmentation of access to the user. Management of the provision of high quality public services continues to be a major social and political issue in many countries. Our research was conducted in the context of UK national policies for performance management (DETR, 2001a), partnership working (DETR, 2000, 2001b; Fordham, 1998), the reduction of health inequalities (DoH, 1998a, 1999), and overall improvements in service quality (DoH, 1998b, 2000). We have concentrated particularly on the issue of making public service partnerships work effectively, to achieve strategic objectives, that is, to improve individual health and personal well being as well as to achieve gains in public health. Specifically, our research questions relate to assessing the readiness of the partners to work together, and to share knowledge that each possesses about their part in the overall service delivery process. By understanding the factors that influence effective knowledge sharing, managers can take practical steps toward improving these antecedent preconditions.

MANAGING THE ANTECEDENTS TO KNOWLEDGE SHARING

The key to partnerships is a focus on the creation of an explicit understanding of what needs to be done to meet strategic objectives –akin to Choo’s concept of a “knowing organization” (Choo, 1988). We conceptualize the role of knowledge in the partnership process (Figure 1) in terms of two core aspects, viz:

- The effective management of information to support the vertical deployment of organizational strategy in terms of communication and development of meaningful performance measures, and
- The wider organizational culture to support attitudes conducive to new ways of working.

Figure 1. The public service partnership: The knowing organization



We have identified six key factors that are associated with successful knowledge sharing in public sector partnerships (Wright & Taylor, 2003), namely:

- Innovative culture
- Change readiness
- Information quality
- Clarity of responsibility
- Strategy formulation and deployment
- Accountability

Innovative Culture

An innovative culture is one where people are receptive, rather than resistant to, new ideas, and where they are motivated to embrace and develop these ideas and shape them into improved working practices. Such cultures provide people with time to reflect, to learn from both success and failure, providing supporting systems to facilitate reflection and capture lessons learned. Finally, innovation is focused on the user or customer, whereby people actively search for new ways of improving service delivery. The legal and political constraints on public service managers and persistent demands for strict oversight can lead to rigidity and bureaucracy in public sector organizations that counter the development of an open and inclusive culture (Scott & Falcone, 1998).

Change Readiness

Change and innovation are closely linked. An innovative culture needs to be able to implement changes to working practices and behaviors generated by innovation. This requires a positive attitude to doing things differently, rather than seeking to maintain the status quo. Change requires leadership, to proactively seek opinions and listen to views

whilst engendering an atmosphere where ideas are freely expressed and there is no perception of a need for staff to cover their backs to protect themselves from criticism and retribution. Involvement and commitment will decline and the organization's innovative potential will be diminished if there is a culture of reluctance to challenge current ways of working. High levels of media scrutiny of public sector organizations (Perry & Rainey, 1988) and the top-down nature of government-imposed changes (Collier, Fishwick & Johnson, 2001) can reduce public sector employees' receptivity to change (Halachmi & Bovaird, 1997). Being ready to change implies a concomitant sensing of the need to change. Information about performance gaps, that highlights the need for change, must be communicated throughout an organization. If people feel that managers pay little attention to performance statistics, they too will ignore them and continue working in ways that maintain the status quo. The nature of the change and the benefits that it will bring need to be understood.

Quality of Information

Good quality information facilitates performance review, and reflection on service delivery. It supports people in their work tasks and it provides a medium for the capture and dissemination of lessons learned. If timely and meaningful information is not provided, people will find it difficult to know how well they are performing, and they will spend extra time searching for the information they really need. Public sector organizations often place less importance on the quality of information and perceive less need to invest in information systems (Rocheleau & Wu, 2002). Unless there is clarity about the basis of performance measurement, information systems will not be perceived as providing appropriate support.

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