

Social Learning Aspects of Knowledge Management

Irena Ali

Department of Defence, Australia

Leoni Warne

Department of Defence, Australia

Celina Pascoe

Department of Defence, Australia

INTRODUCTION

There are probably as many variations of knowledge management definitions as there are practitioners and researchers in the discipline. Complete consensus in such a group would be a surprising finding. This is because the two words are loaded with pre-existing meanings that do not always sit comfortably in juxtaposition, so what it means to “manage knowledge” is difficult to ascertain, and hence comes to mean different things to different people.

We do know however, that knowledge exists in the minds of individuals and is generated and shaped through interaction with others. In an organizational setting, knowledge management must, *at the very least*, be about how knowledge is acquired, constructed, transferred, and otherwise shared with other members of the organization, in a way that seeks to achieve the organization’s objectives. Put another way, knowledge management seeks to harness the power of individuals by supporting them with information technologies and other tools, with the broad aim of enhancing the *learning capability* of individuals, groups, and in turn, organizations (Ali, Warne, Bopping, Hart, & Pascoe, 2004). Social learning, in this context, is defined as learning occurring in or by a cultural cluster or organizational group or team and includes procedures for transmitting knowledge and practices across different work situations, settings, and time. However, the application of technology must be guided by the needs of the organization and its workers. As Davenport (2005, p.162) states, “While I don’t question the importance of technology in organizations today, it’s only one source of knowledge and learning for knowledge workers.”

BACKGROUND

In this article, we examine both theoretical and practical socio-cultural aspects of knowledge management based on years of research by the authors in a large and diverse organization. The study involved numerous functional settings

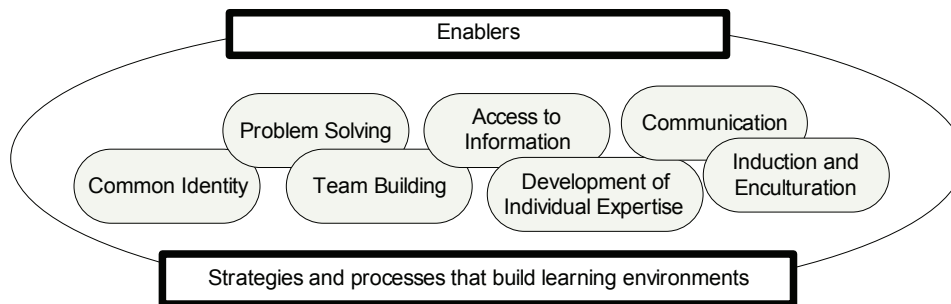
of the organization and the researchers used qualitative and quantitative methodology to gather data. Elements required to build an organizational culture that supports knowledge management are discussed. Unless otherwise specified, words in double quotes in the text are direct quotes from personnel in research settings.

ENABLERS OF SOCIAL LEARNING

The research team identified seven basic categories that constitute enabling processes and strategies to facilitate social learning: common identity, problem solving, team building, access to information, development of individual expertise, communication, and induction and enculturation (see Figure 1).

- **Common identity:** A common ground/understanding to which many people/groups can subscribe, and requires a shift from seeing oneself as separate to seeing oneself as connected to and part of an organization unit. Based on our research, motivators impacting on *common identity* are: goal alignment, cultural identity, gendered identity, language, morale, and workplace design (spatial and physical design).
 - Doney et al. (1998) discuss the relationship between goal alignment and group cohesiveness, claiming that the extent of group cohesiveness relies on the extent to which a team’s goals are clear and accepted and also on the degree to which all members adopt team behaviors.
 - The term cultural identity refers to member’s sense of self in relation to the specific “tribe” and “tradition” to which they belong and how this distinctiveness applies in their workplace. Cultural identity is another important motivator for social learning because, like common identity, it impacts on the extent to which staff feel that they are part of the system or alienated from it.

Figure 1. Constructs enabling social learning



- Gendered identity relates specifically to one's sense of self, which is imbued with the social, cultural and historical constructions surrounding femininity and masculinity. Gender identity, because of its relationship with common identity, was also seen to impact on social learning (Agostino, 1998).
- Language is another important factor fundamental to the overall social learning processes. By reflecting the social and political relationship between various members, language can impact on common identity. Language is also important in terms of creating a shared understanding among workers and their relationship to the wider organization. "Words are bullets. Never, never use imprecise language." Thus learning the specific work related language is of central importance to broader social learning development, and is an important outcome of the enculturation process.
- Morale has been a significant focus in the overall study because the research team found evidence of low morale being coupled with higher levels of alienation towards senior management. Such alienation has obvious implications for the broader understanding of a common identity and thus for social learning.
- Workplace design and proximity also threatens common identity when staff are not working in the same location. "[Building X] and us. We don't see them. There is not any spirit that we are belonging to one branch. I have more to do with [a specific area] than anything else and I've made some good contacts in there... who I sit around with."
- **Problem solving:** A core activity. It fosters social learning, because each problem represents an opportunity to generate knowledge. Motivators associated with this enabler are: networking, perceptions of the organization, systemic understanding, and time for inquiry and reflection.
 - An individual's personal and social networks are an important means of acquiring, propagating, and sharing knowledge. As Davenport and Prusak (1998) claim, when those who are in a position of "know-how" share their expertise, they contribute to problem solving. Personal networks were seen to function as channels supporting both "information pull" and "information push." Atkinson and Moffat (2005) state that sharing of information is based on trust developed through social interaction, shared values, and beliefs. A human is a node in such interactions and a link is a bond that people develop which is based on mutual trust. Therefore, a significant component of a person's information environment consists of the relationships he or she can tap into for various informational needs.
 - Individual and shared perceptions of the organization, and how they operate, provide an essential backdrop to problem solving within an organizational context. These perceptions may consist of deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how people understand their organizational world and how they should act within it (Senge, 1992). The importance of these perceptions cannot be stressed enough, because they directly influence the construction of individuals' knowledge and understandings that they draw upon in their day-to-day-activities.
 - Effective problem solving often requires a systemic understanding of organizational and inter-organizational issues. Systemic understanding requires a holistic view of an organization and its inter-relationships, an understanding of the fabric of relationships and the likely effect of interrelated actions (Davenport, 2005; Senge, 1992).

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