Chapter 10

Knowledge Management Strategy Implementation Through Knowledge Ambassadors

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to explore and explain how knowledge management strategies are implemented effectively across divisions through the application of change agents in the shape of so-called "knowledge ambassadors." Knowledge ambassadors can play an active role in supporting knowledge sharing and effective integration of knowledge management strategies. The chapter is based on a three-year longitudinal participative case study of the implementation of a knowledge management strategy across an organization and its seven geographically dispersed divisions. The results of the study reveal different steps and key activities in effective implementation of a knowledge management strategy and how knowledge ambassadors play a vital role in effective integration of knowledge management tools, continuous support of knowledge sharing practices, and in developing a knowledge culture within the organization.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge Management (KM) has become a key factor in the performance of organizations (Perez-Soltero et al., 2015) and several organizations have established some sort of knowledge management strategy in an attempt to structure and support knowledge sharing across the internal and external organization. Yet, in practice many companies fail in ensuring a continuous focus on knowledge sharing, the full integration of knowledge management strategies and on continuously developing a knowledge culture. Oftentimes the 'news value' of the knowledge management strategy and the knowledge management initiatives wear off, when operations and daily assignments take over the employees' focus.

The challenges of overcoming the obstacles to effective strategy integration and execution have been discussed theoretically and empirically by various authors (Giles, 1991; Pellegrinelli & Bowman, 1994; Al-Ghamdi, 1998; Hrebiniak, 2005, 2006; Kaplan & Norton, 2006; Wheelen & Hunger, 2006; Brenes, Mena & Molina, 2008; Crittenden & Crittenden, 2008; Cater & Pucko, 2010). According to Hrebiniak (2005) all these obstacles relate to one of four groups: the change management context, the organizational culture context, the organizational power structure context and the leadership context. Change agents have been suggested as one of the key tools in ensuring more efficient implementation of changes and in ensuring integration of strategies by a number of authors (Ginsberg & Abrahamson, 1991; Burgelman, 1991; Armenakisi & Fredenberger, 1995; Pitt, McAulay & Sims, 2002; Birkenshaw, Hamel & Mol, 2010). Yet, the majority of the research performed on change agents, focuses on leaders as change agents (Yukl, 2002; Lines, 2007; Westover, 2010) and external change agents such as consultants (Armena-kisi & Fredenberger, 1995; Greenwood, Hinings & Suddaby, 2002) and not on employees, the internal change agents (Birkenshaw, Hamel & Mol, 2008; Shanker & Sayeed, 2012). Furthermore, change agents have not been studied within the knowledge management literature or in terms of knowledge management strategy implementation. Therefore, the concept of 'knowledge ambassadors' will be introduced and explored in this chapter. Knowledge ambassadors serve as change agents in implementing changes through knowledge management strategies integration and in sustaining the organization's continuous change and development towards effective knowledge sharing in a knowledge company. In the following a framework for this examination will be presented including a mapping of the key aspects of knowledge and knowledge management, knowledge management strategies and -implementation through the use of change agents in the form of knowledge ambassadors.

Identifying the Concepts of Knowledge and Knowledge Management

The nature of knowledge has been described as 'justified true belief' (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) and as 'a fluid of framed experience, values, contextual information and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information' (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). Moreover, Bollinger and Smith (2001) describe knowledge as 'the understanding, awareness, or familiarity acquired through study, investigation, observation, or experience over the course of time'; that is, knowledge is an individual's interpretation of information based on personal experiences, skills and competencies. Managing knowledge well can develop new opportunities, creating value for customers, obtaining competitive advantages or improving performance (Lloria, 2008). According Dayan and Evans (2006) the activities of KM include knowledge capture, documentation, retrieval and reuse, creation, transfer and sharing of its knowledge assets integrated in its operational and business processes. Earl (2001) suggests that knowledge management can be viewed from seven dimensions with their focuses as follows: (1) system: technology; (2) cartographic: maps; (3) engineering: processes; (4) commercial: income; (5) organizational: networks; (6) spatial: space; and (7) strategic: mindset. Alavi and Leidner (1999, 2001) concluded in their study that the perceived organizational benefits of KM scheme could be shown in two primary dimensions: process improvement (e.g., enhancing communication, reducing problem-solving time, better serving the clients and providing accountability) and organizational out-comes (e.g., cost reduction, increased sales, personnel reduction and higher profitability).

Recent empirical effort has found support for the direct impact of knowledge management on company performance, yet we should take the positive results with some cautions (Yeoh & Roth, 1999; Decarolis & Dees, 1999; Tanriverdi & Venkatraman, 2005). A simplistic conclusion of these studies could mistakenly

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