Chapter 31
Knowledge Management for Development (KM4D)

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge management began in the private sector but has since been adopted by governments and international development agencies alike. In the mid-nineties, Stephen Denning established the Knowledge Management Program of the World Bank, which has served as the model for applying KM to international development assistance or KM4D. This chapter differentiates corporate KM from KM4D. It presents a typology and enumerates KM4D sectors and themes used by the international development assistance community in the past two and a half decades.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge management, as a discipline, was borne out of the need to systematically leverage the intellectual assets of an organization to achieve corporate goals. We can trace its origins to Nonaka and Takeuchi's treatise on the knowledge creating company (1995), which was informed by the tacit-explicit knowledge dichotomy of Polanyi (1967). However, it was Davenport and Prusak (1997) who introduced the term knowledge management to the wider management science community.

At the very onset, knowledge management was intended as a tool for the private sector, a means to increase an organization's IQ, as Bill Gates (1999) puts it. Soon after its introduction to the corporate world, however, it was embraced by both the government sector and the international development assistance community owing to the fact that governments and international agencies are, by nature, knowledge organizations. These include United Nations agencies; international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD); regional financial bodies such as the Latin American Development Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the African Development Bank; and bilateral aid agencies as well, such as USAID, AusAID, CIDA, JICA, AFD, DFID and others.

Considering the urgent nature of the societal problems addressed by this area, the emphasis of the KM4D community for the past twenty-five years has been on practice rather than on research or theory building. There have been attempts to define the field, but the desirability of a grounded approach to the discourse necessitated sound referents found in its practice. Thus, even academic journals devoted to this area (e.g., KM4D Journal) focused on field practice documentation and evaluation. Nevertheless, an attempt at defining KM4D by differentiating it from conventional KM can serve as a starting point of theory.

It is the intention of this chapter to differentiate corporate KM from KM4D. It enumerates KM4D sectors and themes used by the international development assistance community in the past two and a half decades. Furthermore, the chapter attempts to present a proto-typology of corporate KM and KM4D for purposes of future theory building and of thickening the knowledge management discourse.

BACKGROUND

Among the first to apply knowledge management to the development agenda and the public sphere was Stephen Denning, who headed the Knowledge Management Program of the World Bank. Denning (2000) employed a technique which he calls organizational storytelling to champion KM among his colleagues. He presents the beginnings of the KM4D narrative in the following account:

As a manager in the World Bank in 1996, I had been trying to communicate the idea of knowledge management and to get people to understand and to implement it. At that time in that organization, knowledge management was a strange and generally incomprehensible idea. I used the traditional methods of communicating with no success… In my desperation, I was willing to try anything and eventually I stumbled on the power of a story, such as the following: "In June 1995, a health worker in a tiny town in Zambia logged on to the website for the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta Georgia and got the answer to a question on how to treat malaria….

This was June 1995, not June 2001. This was not the capital of Zambia but a tiny place six hundred kilometers away. This was not a rich country: this was Zambia, one of the poorest countries in the world. But the most important part of this picture for us in the World Bank is this: the World Bank isn't in the picture. The World Bank doesn't have its know-how accessible to all the millions of people who made decisions about poverty. But just imagine if it had...This story had helped galvanize staff and managers to imagine a different kind of future for the organization and to set about implementing it. Once knowledge management became an official corporate strategy later that year, I continued to use similar stories to reinforce and continue the change. The efforts were successful: by 2000, the World Bank was benchmarked as a world leader in knowledge management. (Denning, 2000)

There is reason to believe that the roots of knowledge management in the public sphere extended before Nonaka and Takeuchi. It may be traced to a group of pre-World War II Austrian academics who represented a school of thought, known as knowledge economics. Its luminaries were Hayek (1937) and Schumpeter (1942). The movement situated knowledge as a major economic variable but it was overshadowed by the Keynesian school, which dominated post-Bretton Woods economic theory and practice. In the sixties, it was resurrected in the United States by Machlup (1962) and later on by Porat

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