Chapter 4.11
Knowledge Sharing Barriers

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INTRODUCTION

To ensure continued existence, an organization must develop ways to share the knowledge that is possessed within that organization with the people who need, or who will need, that knowledge. This critical organizational task transcends departmental boundaries and is a necessary element for the maintenance of every organizational function. Improving the efficiency of knowledge sharing is a highly desirable goal because it offers a promise of compounded returns as the organization works harder and smarter. As business practices have developed over the last few decades, knowledge workers have developed a variety of mechanisms and routines to share knowledge, but these have not yet been well studied. Specifically, the barriers to knowledge sharing remain somewhat elusive.

A better understanding of the knowledge-sharing process may provide managers with a set of tools that could be used to identify and combat barriers to knowledge sharing, which could lead to much more efficient organizational routines. In this article, the process of knowledge sharing will be examined by framing the knowledge-sharing transaction as a form of communication in order to identify and isolate the barriers to that type of communication. Once the barriers are isolated, they can be overcome.

BACKGROUND

In order to manage knowledge, researchers must first develop an understanding of the way that knowledge flows through an organization. The flow of knowledge is reflected in the most basic construct of this article: knowledge sharing. Opposing that flow of knowledge, barriers to knowledge sharing present a challenge to every organization. However, when the managers of an organization embark on a journey to improve knowledge sharing within that organization, they are met by a host of confusing issues. If they review the literature, they find a wide variety of issues that are thought to prevent knowledge

sharing, each of which is typically deemed the most critical by the researcher who is promoting it. If they hire outside consultants, they may be offered solutions to problems that they do not even have. Until the managers are able to objectively measure how the specific barriers to knowledge sharing are perceived to exist within their organization, they will be unsure of the optimum method of overcoming those barriers. The first step to objectively measuring knowledge workers' perceptions of barriers to knowledge sharing in an organizational environment is the identification of the many barriers to knowledge sharing that exist within the organization.

It is proposed that barriers to knowledge sharing should actually be measured in terms of knowledge workers' perceptions of barriers to knowledge sharing. Though the difference is subtle, it acknowledges the fact that many decisions are made on a subconscious level, and that there is no surety that knowledge workers are cognizant of the particular barriers that they face, or even if they are, they will not always act rationally to promote the organizational good. In addition, even when knowledge workers understand why they act, they may not be able to explain their actions to researchers, and thus their perceptions must be used as a proxy to measure the effect of a barrier to knowledge sharing.

The concept of knowledge sharing is best illustrated by Foy (1999, p. 15.2): "facilitating learning, through sharing, into usable ideas, products and processes." This definition implies that the focus should be on sharing knowledge within an organization for a specific purpose. Thus, this concept diverges somewhat from the field of learning (because learning may or may not have an organizational imperative or objective) but may still draw from that field because learning is an artifact from the knowledge-sharing process.

UNMASKING BARRIERS TO KNOWLEDGE SHARING

The Knowledge-Sharing Process

A common tendency in knowledge management (KM) research has been to build on the work to understand knowledge that was begun in the 1960s. Polanyi (1962, 1967), who introduced the concepts of tacit and explicit knowledge, is widely cited. Nonaka's (1994) and Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) further research into the way that knowledge is created in organizations has also been of significant influence. Perhaps because of these three great contributors, most of the constructs that have been researched as possible barriers to knowledge sharing are cognitive or behavioral based. From the factors-for-success literature (Bennett & Gabriel, 1999; Broadbent, Weill, & St. Clair, 1999; Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Purvis, Sambamurthy, & Zmud, 2001), an emphasis has been placed on determining the factors that enable KM systems. The globalization research (Chow, Deng, & Ho, 2000; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, Neijen, Ohayv, & Sanders, 1990; Okunoye, 2002) emphasizes culture, including both the national and the organizational culture. McDermott and O'Dell (2001) found that organizational culture was more important to knowledge sharing than the approach or commitment to KM.

Barriers to Knowledge Sharing

The KM literature yields several articles that describe knowledge sharing as it occurs in sample organizations. KM researchers have identified a host of barriers to knowledge sharing, but generally focus on a single knowledge-sharing context. The issues that could potentially constitute barriers to knowledge sharing that have been identified in the KM literature are summarized in Table 1.

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