Chapter 4.26
Open Collectivism and Knowledge Communities in Japan

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to introduce an Eastern CoPs' specific approach that is quite different from that of Western communities. In a collectivist prevalent societal type, the "sharing of feelings should come first, naturally followed by knowledge sharing" type of approach works very well even in a business environment.

One of Japan's traditional manufacturers has launched several interesting knowledge communities that are different from the accepted Western KM approach that emphasizes cost and effect straightforwardly. Their approach emphasized the generation of social networking on intranet first, and at a later stage, they proceeded to knowledge sharing through communities of practice.

This "go slow to go fast" approach may look like one of the typical and traditional Japanese management styles. However, in this approach, the culture of this company group steadily changes from introverted and closed to extroverted and open.

Their approach to build open and extroverted collectivism that is generated by knowledge communities could be one of the new management style prototypes of Japanese companies in the future.

BACKGROUND

QP Corporation is a top-class Japanese company, manufacturing and marketing mayonnaise and salad dressings in Japan. One of the group companies manufactures jam. QP is one of the top brands in the food industry. They have been in the food manufacturing business more than 80 years with 2,200 employees. The total number of employees including group companies is 6,000.

This means that QP are typical of the traditional business group in Japan.

Their operation of knowledge communities has a 3.5-year history. In the past, their original KM approach failed when they built knowledge databases for knowledge sharing. This approach did not work well, let alone match the expectations of management. Therefore, this time, they decided against the mechanical approach such as building a knowledge database instead of building knowledge communities on their intranet was tried.

As far as the communities' approaches toward face-to-face activity, traditional socializing approaches such as company outings, pub drinking, and factory participation in local festivals where employees socialize with local people work very well in this company. And small-group employee activities for incremental improvement also work well. Therefore, the main activities of the revised QP KM plan focused on building knowledge communities on their intranet. The purposes was to change the company culture from a closed and introverted one to an open and extroverted one; promote employees to knowledge workers who are individually treasured; and promote workers into those who produce and share business ideas.

In the past, one of the features of Japanese companies was an introverted collectivism that supports the production of a quality product. However, in the 21st century of rapidly changing market environments, companies need fresh idea generation for new products and for new marketing, and it is clear that fresh ideas cannot emerge only between intimate colleagues. New ideas can come from anybody else inside and outside of organizations. Knowledge communities supply companies with "the strength of weak ties", backed by social networking that bridges silo type organizations.

SOCIAL NETWORKING BY KNOWLEDGE COMMUNITIES

KM Team Blogging

QP Corporation started building knowledge communities by using Lotus Notes software on their intranet. A centrally organized knowledge management team consisted of five employees. One of their roles is to behave as if they are company news reporters, and they compile different articles about the business and put them on the knowledge repository in Lotus Notes. They also provide company newsletters that brief all the employees of QP group by e-mail about these newly posted articles. After that, employees can voluntarily read some articles and post their comments. As far as posting comments are concerned, two different ways of posting were arranged by the KM team. One was posting for discussion on common forum, called the tea lounge, where a link from each article is prepared. Another way to comment is through the employee posting anonymously onto a bulletin board that is also linked to each article.

The category of these articles by the KM team varies from reports of shareholder meetings, introduction of new products, competitors' information to reports of management and employees' lives. As far as well visited articles are concerned, the articles relating to customers' voices are the most popular ones, and they convey customers' messages directly to all the employees. They sometimes include claims or request for product and services improvement.

The articles of customers' voices are compiled by the KM team, and the production process is the following: First, KM team contacts the call center to pick up customers' claims and needs. After that, the KM team contacts R&D or relevant manufacturing department for further informa-

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