

# Knowledge Communication

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## INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWLEDGE COMMUNICATION IN MANAGEMENT

Communicating professional knowledge is a key activity for today's specialized workforce. The efficient and effective transfer of experiences, insights, and know-how among different experts and decision makers is a prerequisite for high-quality decision making and coordinated, organizational action (Straub & Karahanna, 1998). Situations of such deliberate (interfunctional) knowledge transfer through interpersonal communication or group conversations (Gratton & Goshal, 2002) can be found in many business constellations, as the following typical examples illustrate:

Technology experts present their evaluation of a new technology to management in order to jointly devise a new production strategy (McDermott, 1999). Engineers who have discovered how to master a difficult manufacturing process need to convey their methods to engineers in other business units (Szulanski, 1996, 1999). Legal experts brief a management team on the implications of new regulations on their business model (Wilmotte & Morgan, 1984). Experts from various domains need to share their views and insights regarding a common goal in order to agree on a common rating of risks, requirements (Browne & Ramesh, 2002), industries, or clients. Project leaders need to present their results to the upper management and share their experiences of past projects in order to assess the potential of new project candidates (Schindler & Eppler, 2003). Scientists who work as drug developers present new avenues for future products that business unit managers must assess. Market researchers present their statistical analyses of recent consumer surveys to the head of marketing (Boland et al., 2001). Strategy consultants present the findings of their strategic company assessment to the board of directors in order to devise adequate measures (Creplet, Duouet, Kern, Mehmanzafir, & Munier, 2001).

What these diverse situations all have in common is the problem of *knowledge asymmetry* (Sharma, 1997) that has to be resolved through interpersonal communication. While the manager typically has the authority to make strategic or tactical decisions, he or she often lacks the specialized expertise required to make an informed decision on a complex issue (Watson, 2004). Because of the

wide scope of decisions that need to be made, a manager frequently has to delegate the decision preparation to experts who—based on their professional training and previous experience—can analyze complex situations or technological options in a more reliable manner. The results of such analyses then need to be communicated back to the manager, often under considerable time constraints. The knowledge communication challenge, however, begins long before that, at the time when the manager has to convey his or her knowledge needs and decision constraints to the experts in order to delegate the analysis task effectively.

## BACKGROUND: THE CONCEPT OF KNOWLEDGE COMMUNICATION

Based on the reasoning described in the previous section, we define *knowledge communication* as the (deliberate) activity of interactively conveying and co-constructing insights, assessments, experiences, or skills through verbal and non-verbal means. Knowledge communication has taken place when an insight, experience, or skill has been successfully reconstructed by an individual because of the communicative actions of another. Knowledge communication thus designates the successful transfer of know-how (e.g., how to accomplish a task), know-why (e.g., the cause-effect relationships of a complex phenomenon), know-what (e.g., the results of a test), and know-who (e.g., the experiences with others) through face-to-face (co-located) or media-based (virtual) interactions. This type of knowledge communication can take place synchronously or asynchronously.<sup>1</sup> The first mode of communication refers to (often face-to-face) real-time interactions, while the latter designates delayed (usually media-based) interactions.

We use the term *knowledge dialogues* for the first type of (synchronous) knowledge communication, stressing the interactive and collaborative style of knowledge exchange in this communication mode (see Isaacs, 1997; Nonaka, Toyama, & Konno, 2000). Depending on the knowledge-focused goal of such dialogues, we distinguish among *Crealogues* (that focus on in the creation of new insights), *Sharealogues* (facilitating knowledge transfer), *Assessalogues* (focusing on the evaluation of new insights), and *Doalogues* (e.g., turning understanding

into committed action, i.e., ‘talk the walk’). Each type of knowledge dialogue requires different behavior and interaction patterns and support measures (e.g., whereas Assesalogues require critical, convergent evaluation tools, Crealogues require an open atmosphere for divergent thinking and rapid idea generation without judgment).

With regard to asynchronous knowledge communication, we refer to the concept of *knowledge media* (see Eppler, Röpneck, & Seifried, 1999) as enabling knowledge transfer through technology-based communication, collaboration, e-learning, aggregation, retrieval, and archiving services. Knowledge media can be differentiated in terms of their target community, such as scientific knowledge media, public knowledge media, professional knowledge media, and so forth. The concept of knowledge media in general stresses the importance of a community that collaborates regularly using a common platform that consists not only of IT functionalities, but also of common communication norms and (usage) rules.

In this understanding, knowledge communication is *more* than communicating information (e.g., facts, figures, events, situations, developments, etc.) or emotions (e.g., fears, hopes, reservations, commitment) because it requires conveying context, background, and basic assumptions. It requires the communication of personal insights and experiences. Communicating insights requires the elicitation of one’s rationale and reasoning (i.e., one’s argumentation structure); of one’s perspective, ratings, and priorities; and of one’s hunches and intuition. At times it may even be necessary to present an overview of the expert’s relevant skills along with his/her previous professional experiences and credentials (Lunce, Iyer, Courtney, & Schkade, 1993) in order to build trust and enable an adequate atmosphere for effective knowledge transfer. Thus, in addition to pure information (and at times emotion), a myriad of other indicators need to be provided in order to transfer knowledge. These indicators help the person who requires insights from another to understand the other’s perspective, to reconstruct the other’s insights correctly, and to connect them to one’s own prior knowledge.

Still, knowledge communication does not only differ in terms of *what* is communicated (knowledge in context rather than isolated data or information<sup>2</sup>), but also *how* one communicates. The transfer of information can often be successful without additional effort beyond an ordinary, everyday communication style. Communicating expertise-based, complex insights, by contrast, calls for didactic tricks and at times sophisticated indirect speech acts and visualization means that help the other side to become actively involved in the communication and engage in a collaborative, goal-directed sense-making process—a prerequisite for the construction of new knowl-

edge (see Weick, 1995). The process of knowledge communication hence requires more reciprocal interaction between decision makers and experts because both sides only have a fragmented understanding of an issue and consequently can only gain a complete comprehension by iteratively aligning their mental models. All of this means that when we communicate knowledge, we are still communicating information and emotions, but we also create a specific type of context so that this information can be used to re-construct insights, create new perspectives, or acquire new skills.

This (interpersonal) communication perspective on knowledge transfer has already been emphasized by other researchers—who explicitly label this view as ‘knowledge communication’ (Scarborough, 1995, p. 997; Antonelli, 2000; Harada, 2003; Reiserer, Ertl, & Mandl, 2002)—and by several practitioners (e.g., Watson, 2004). Nevertheless, these authors have often treated knowledge communication as a kind of black box that is described only in broad terms and general traits, such as the major communication goals or steps. By examining the communication problems that often impede knowledge transfer in detail, we can look into this black box and propose pragmatic ways of improving knowledge communication, especially among experts and managers where the chasm between in-depth knowledge and decision authority is particularly apparent.

## **PROBLEMS IN COMMUNICATING KNOWLEDGE AMONG EXPERTS AND DECISION MAKERS**

In order to better understand the problems that can impede the effective transfer of decision-relevant knowledge from experts to managers and from managers to experts, we will review relevant constructs and prior findings from social and engineering sciences, as there are in fact numerous concepts that describe issues related to sub-optimal knowledge transfer. These concepts regard topics such as interdepartmental knowledge transfer, professional communication, decision making, communication technology, or the nature of expert knowledge. By screening these disciplines and topic areas, we can establish a first overview of possible knowledge communication problems and we can create a systematic terminology to speak more explicitly (and consistently) about knowledge communication barriers.

Previously identified barriers of knowledge communication are summarized in Table 1. There are three main criteria for including concepts in this table: First, the concept has to be closely related to problems of interpersonal, professional knowledge transfer.<sup>3</sup> Second, the

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