

Chapter 1.30

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 implica-

tions 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, Mehmanzapor, & 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.¹ 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 Assessalogues 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 in-

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