

Chapter 3

Knowledge Leaders as Multipliers: Creating and Promoting the Conditions for Successful Knowledge Management

Renée López-Richer

Independent Researcher, Canada

Caroline Thompson

Independent Researcher, Canada

ABSTRACT

In order for knowledge management (KM) to thrive, an organization requires a combination of conditions that form the runway from which a KM initiative can take off. There is general agreement that technology, human resources, organizational culture, and leadership are among the key enablers of successful KM. The intentions and actions of knowledge leaders in particular can make a profound difference to how KM is institutionalized in an organization. The relationship between leadership and KM has been studied extensively, especially established leadership styles such as transformational and transactional leadership. In this chapter, the authors explore the influence of knowledge leadership on KM through the lens of Liz Wiseman's leadership paradigm, Multipliers. The authors propose that effective knowledge leadership reflects the traits of the multiplier: leaders who draw on certain skills and approaches to effectively "multiply" the intelligence of an organization.

INTRODUCTION

Implementation of knowledge management (KM) is a multistep process (Rhem, 2015), with the potential for interruption at any step along the way. Not only does the practice involve the capture, sharing, and reuse of material that can often be ambiguous and dynamic, but it takes place in a complex environment that is susceptible to changing circumstances. Externally, for example, organizations are faced with intense competition, regulatory changes, and the pressures of globalization. In the face of these and other

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such challenges, it can be difficult to prioritize KM initiatives, particularly given the substantial and consistent investments required for KM and the difficulty of quantifying its impact.

Internally, KM is dependent on several interdependent enablers, including organizational culture and the actors within that culture—both of which are difficult to change. In an organizational setting where employees hoard their knowledge because it is seen as a source of competitive advantage among their peers, or where failures and lessons learned are not shared for fear of negative consequences, KM implementations will be arduous as they require practices that will appear to work against the prevailing culture.

Under these circumstances, leaders play a critical role in shaping the success of KM in an organization. The quality bar of KM is determined by the skills and behaviors leaders employ, and KM can live or die by them (Donate & Sánchez de Pablo, 2015). However, because different people lead in different ways, the influence of varying leadership styles on the discipline is an area that has been explored at length. In particular, emphasis has been placed on the role of transformational and transactional leadership styles in KM.

This chapter offers a contemporary perspective on the delicate alchemy between leadership and KM by exploring the topic through the lens of “Multipliers” (Wiseman, 2017). The chapter begins by outlining the conditions which are commonly understood as being enablers of successful KM: Technology, human resources (HR), organizational culture, and leadership. Subsequently, the authors explore knowledge leadership in more detail, discussing the competencies which are associated with effective knowledge leaders using the language of Multipliers. This language offers an interesting and exciting way to discuss leadership, with a particular emphasis on those styles and qualities that can be seen to amplify the strengths of those being led, producing a ripple effect that can resonate throughout an organization.

BACKGROUND

The crafts of leadership and KM, as well as the intersection of the two, have been well-documented and studied—especially since the advent of information technology (IT) (Cleveland, 1985). Early interest in the relationship between leadership and KM emerged from an understanding that leadership was a critical component of successful KM implementations. A study by Andersen and the American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC) (1996) identified the lack of commitment from senior leadership as a critical reason why organizations are unable to effectively implement KM practices. In their survey of successful KM projects, Davenport et al. (1998) identified senior management support as one of eight factors contributing to the successful implementation of a KM initiative.

Many of these foundational studies focused on the importance of leadership broadly defined, namely they considered the impact of supportive executives of all kinds, not just those who are responsible for the management of organizational knowledge or information. Such people are often known as *knowledge leaders*, people who provide “strategic visions, motivate, communicate, and give direction to drive the company in a changing context” (Bertoldi et al., 2018, p. 589). Kluge et al. (2001) indicated, for example, that formal leaders at all levels of an organization have unique roles to play in KM, with Chief Executive Officers (CEO) being of particular importance to the knowledge sharing process. Roth (2003) compiled different types of knowledge-oriented workers (e.g., knowledge activist and knowledge broker) who fulfill various aspects of knowledge leadership without necessarily being in formal leadership positions.

As adoption of KM gained traction in corporate settings, some researchers began exploring the role of dedicated knowledge leaders in the success of KM (Abell & Oxbrow, 1999; Bontis, 2001; Cope-

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