Chapter 54
Knowledge for Communicating Knowledge

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Category: Organizational Aspects of Knowledge Management

INTRODUCTION

All organizations depend on communication, namely the exchange of information with the sender's intent that the message be understood and considered by the receivers. And as organizations are designed for action, most organizational communication is intended for driving action and for promoting working relationships between actors. Indeed, communication plays a pivotal role in organizations and may be seen as the founda-tion of organizational action (Galbraith, 1977; Weick, 1979).

Effective communication, particularly the communication of knowledge rather than the com-munication of facts, requires knowledge of how the message may be understood and considered by the receiver. Conversely, communication is required for knowledge communication and transfer but this issue is beyond our scope. Furthermore, our discussion is restricted to computer-based knowl-edge management, as well as computer mediated communication. Therefore, the terms knowledge management (KM) and communication, whenever used here, imply that these functions involve computer support.

Despite the central role of communication in organizations, organizational communication is unfortunately susceptible to numerous obstacles

and barriers. Barriers to communication occur at the individual and organizational level. At the individual level, interpersonal dynamics interfere with communication, people choose inappropriate channels and media, senders and receivers use different semantics that create misunderstanding, and senders communicate conflicting cues in different messages confusing the receiver. At the organizational level, people in different departments see things differently, power and politics interfere with open and sincere exchanges, and organizational norms or policies dictate ineffective channels and inappropriate forms of messages.

Knowledge in and about the organization can overcome some of the barriers, and in particular, KM can enhance computerized communication support systems such as structured e-mail, video conferencing, listservs, instant messaging and so forth. Knowledge about the message in the context of knowledge in the organization, such as similar messages communicated in the past, improves the comprehensibility of the message. Knowledge about the receiver can serve to personalize the message for better learning. And knowledge about the relationship between sender and receiver can determine the common ground between them and adapt the message accordingly. However, to do so, designs of KM systems must be based on an understanding of the communication process. This chapter presents a working framework of organizational communication and shows how it can be used to capitalize on knowledge to improve communication.

BACKGROUND

Our understanding of communication, and particularly computer-mediated communication in the organizational context, has developed dramatically in the last few decades. The classical information-transmission model introduced by Shannon and Weaver (1949) has transformed into more active, psychological, and social models of communication (Axley, 1986). See, for example, Riva and Galimberti, 1998 for an overview of these transformations in theories and metaphors of communication. In the interest of brevity and in order to identify the role of KM in enhancing communication, we select one model of organizational communication (Te'eni, 2001) that helps to define the link between KM and communication. The model has three main factors, each of which includes several attributes:

1. Inputs to the communication process include (a) distance between sender and receiver, (b) values and norms of communication, and (c) attributes of the task that is the object of the communication;
2. A cognitive-affective communication process of exchanging a message that describes the choice and implementation of (a) one or more communication strategies used to transmit the message, (b) the form of the message and (c) the medium through which it is transmitted; and
3. The communication impact: (a) the mutual understanding and (b) the relationship between the sender and receiver.

Consider the following example. A product designer in an industrial plant may send a message to the marketing director about a new product under development, explaining the bill of materials expected for the product. This information is useful to the marketing director when pricing the product. The communication (semantic) distance between the communicators may be large due to their different background disciplines (engineering and marketing). However, working for the same company, they accept the same communication norms by which information in the organization is always openly shared as early as possible. The sender may choose to communicate the message by a typed letter (choice of medium) and using the formal template for internal budgeting (choice of message form). Additionally, the sender sends an

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