

Chapter 4.19

Knowledge, Culture, and Cultural Impact on Knowledge Management: Some Lessons for Researchers and Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

This chapter offers a taste of the ingredients for further debates that continue to emerge from within knowledge management communities. The author has identified the nuts and bolts of the debate encountered by managers who find themselves faced with high costs involved in breaking cultural barriers, and offers suggestions as to how these can be overcome. From an academic perspective, the author argues that successful knowledge creation and management comes from the combination of two schools of thought – social and technological – and that any considerations that sideline either of these will be wrong or may be hard to justify, when related to the claim of best practice and/or

the rationale of quality delivery of the business case. The chapter argues that current organisational practices involving a strong emphasis on team work and the ability to use technologies dominate business operations hence, it is equally important to unblock the human factors that are likely to hinder people's interaction within a team as it is to keep to the minimum physical barriers and systems that may impede this exercise.

INTRODUCTION TO KNOWLEDGE

Although the debate on 'knowledge' has existed for centuries, dating back to Plato's (427- 348/347 BC)¹, definition of knowledge as "justified true belief", knowledge has been defined differently and there exists disagreement on what constitutes

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knowledge. The Collins English Dictionary (1998:857) defined knowledge as:

“...(i) expertise, and skills acquired by a person through experience or education; the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject, (ii) what is known in a particular field or in total; facts and information or (iii) awareness or familiarity gained by experience of a fact or situation.”

Existing disagreements were underlined recently by scholars during the 9th European Academic Conference on Knowledge Management (2008) where scholars summed up the debate by arguing that *“there is no solid agreement on what KM is, nor even on what constitutes knowledge”* (Rees, 2008:1). Academics further argued that:

- Knowledge management is a cross-cutting issue, not a single subject domain
- To date there remains disagreement on methodologies, definitions and processes of research and working within knowledge and its management
- There are, however, emerging trends, but no new dominant approaches and methodologies regarding knowledge and its management,
- Within the limitations of agreement, there were shared grounds and common fundamentals.

Referring to the above aspects of knowledge management research, Bolissani (2008) shows that academics are in agreement on the types and composites of knowledge – and how knowledge transfer can be achieved (both by focusing on characteristics of codified and tacit knowledge). Codified knowledge is that which can be written down, stored and transmitted through material forms, as opposed to tacit knowledge which is by and large accepted as a form of experience which can be learnt through interaction and in action learning. Tacit knowledge cannot be written

down (Polyani, 1966). From the broad discussion that will follow, the reader will discover that there is a need to think beyond the meanings different authors have taken forward regarding cultural implications on knowledge management issues. The main reason is because there are possibilities that discussing culture in written forms poses challenges that the debate itself can be limited by the contextual analysis as well as perspectives of the author. In any case however, there is a general agreement that knowledge transfer and knowledge management are understood as the sharing of ideas, knowledge or experiences between a group of people, between units of a company, or between a company and its customers and vice versa. The authors accept that knowledge can be either tangible or intangible and knowledge transfer is therefore a process responsible for gathering, analysing, storing and sharing this knowledge within an organisation with the primary purpose of managing that knowledge to improve as to improve efficiency by reducing the need to self-repeat in the search through the existing knowledge.

The Types of Knowledge: A Cultural Perspective

Research into cultural implications for knowledge creation, its transfer and management cannot underestimate types of knowledge and how they fit into a broad contextual analysis of culture. The best classification of types of knowledge and how they relate to each other was identified by Lundvall and Johnson (1994). In their argument, Lundvall and Johnson (1994) differentiated between diverse kinds of knowledge which are important in the knowledge-based economy: know-what, know-why, know-how and know-who. For example, market prospecting for a new product or recruiting labour, and training staff has to use its know-how. The same is true for the skilled worker operating complicated machine tools. Know-how is typically a kind of knowledge developed and kept within the boundaries of an individual firm. One

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