

Chapter 6.1

Leading in a Knowledge Era: A New Dawn for Knowledge Leaders

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge management (KM) has been found to be a critical success factor for organizational performance. However, most organizations are found to be purely focused on the technological perspectives of KM initiatives at the expense of people perspective. They fail to realize that the success of any KM system relies upon the acceptance and motivation of knowledge worker (k-worker), the primary player in any KM initiatives. Here, knowledge leaders have a crucial role to play in influencing and encouraging k-workers to adopt KM practices. However, a transformation of leader behavior is required to manage this new generation of workers. This chapter thus highlights the power-influence approach to leadership behavior in promoting and instilling KM practices among k-workers.

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership is one complex phenomenon that is evolving and has been addressed from diverse perspectives. A review of the current literature (Pearce, Sims, Cox, Ball, Schnell, Smith, & Trevino, 2003; Yukl, 2006) indicates that there are a myriad of leadership models that have been constructed to define leadership behavior. Leaders have been elucidated in terms of character, mannerism, influence and persuasion, relationship patterns, role relationships, and as administrative figures. In short, leadership is defined as influence processes that affect the action of followers (Ansari, 1990; Yukl, 2006).

Recently, there is a strong call for transformation of leader behavior. The underlying essence of this call for transformation is that the various models and taxonomies on effective leader behavior that have been developed over time may no longer be directly applicable in this knowledge era.

With the advent of a new generation of workers--k-workers who are clearly different from other workers--there is a significant change in leader-subordinate relationships (MacNeil, 2003; Viitala, 2004) with a noticeable shift of power from leaders to k-workers (McCrimmon, 1995). In fact, Gapp (2002) reported that leadership and management style has undergone a major revolution under the system of profound knowledge. In essence, k-workers require eccentric people management practices (Amar, 2001; Hislop, 2003; Ribiere & Sitar, 2003).

Although it is apparent that leadership permeates as the foundation for KM system success, there is very little research to support the relationship between leadership behavior and knowledge management (Politis, 2001). The present chapter aims at bridging this gap in the literature by advocating the use of power-influence approach to leadership in a knowledge-based context. Given a relative paucity of research in the KM area, our discussion builds upon a narrative review (rather than meta-analytic review) of the literature to develop a framework based on the power and influence taxonomy (Ansari, 1990; French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1962).

We have divided the discussion into four major sections. First, we discuss the failure of KM initiatives and the key role of the leaders in ensuring the acceptance and eventually the improved performance of these initiatives. Second, we set the stage for further discussion on the issue of the transforming workforce and the emergence of a new generation of workers referred to as "k-workers." The discussion on the transforming workforce is an eye opener to the need for the transformed leadership behavior which would be based on the interpersonal influence and social power model. Third, we advocate the effectiveness of leadership behavior that we believe should be employed to successfully influence k-workers to embrace KM practices. Fourth, we suggest directions for future research, followed by a conclusion.

THE BACKGROUND

The Underlying Essence of KM Initiative Success

Knowledge management (KM) can be defined as the organized process of creating, capturing, storing, disseminating, and using knowledge within and between organizations to maintain competitive advantage (Darroch, 2003; Davenport & Prusak, 2000; Nonaka, 1994). It requires the transformation of personal knowledge into corporate knowledge that can be shared and applied throughout the organization (Skyrme, 1997).

Over time, KM has evolved as a strategic process that has a clear link to organizational performance. Most organizations are seeking benefits of KM in order to build on their competitive advantage such as capturing and sharing best practices, effectively managing customer relationships, and delivering competitive intelligence (Ming Yu, 2002; Syed-Ikhsan & Rowland, 2004). A survey by Reuters (2001) revealed that 90 percent of the companies which deploy KM solutions benefit from better decision making whereas 81 percent say they noticed increased productivity (as cited in Malhotra, 2001). Some companies such as the BP Amoco, Xerox, and Dearborn experience great levels of cost savings by leveraging knowledge it had (Ambrosio, 2000; Lam & Chua, 2005). In essence, KM initiative has a forceful influence on maximizing organizational performance (Axelsen, 2002; Karlenzing & Patrick, 2002; Talisayon, 2002). Bearing this in mind, most organizations are trying to outdo one another in implementing the best KM systems to evade being left out and to harvest the promised benefits (Lam & Chua, 2005).

However, despite the focus on implementing KM enabling technologies and systems, countless KM initiatives fail to realize what they set out to do (De Long & Fahey, 2000; Smith, Blackman, & Good, 2003). Disturbingly, KM experts divulged that KM failure rates are estimated to

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