

Chapter VI

Valuing a Multiplicity of Views: How to Tap Informal Networks to See the (W)hole

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides perspective and practical techniques that individuals and organizations can use to maximize knowledge transfer efforts. It illustrates the importance of using informal sources of information sharing to create a complete picture. The authors assert that using the traditional formal channels of transfer can leave holes when attempting to share the whole. Overall, the chapter offers practical, easily executable solutions that individuals can apply and that leaders can teach to fill the gaps that often go unnoticed. Influenced by sense making, storytelling, psychology, and visual mapping, the authors offer tools and provide coaching for using the tools, contained in text boxes throughout the chapter. The intent is to both introduce concepts and make them straightforward for the reader to implement.

INTRODUCTION

This is a story all of us have heard or experienced in some form. A young professional takes a job at a Fortune 300 company. For our story, it is a diversity and inclusion professional who takes a job at a company with a 30 year legacy of practicing inclusion. The organization has an inspiring

story to share which has received much press for its accomplishments. On her first day of work, our young professional found a timeline of progress in diversity. It provided beneficial information that helped to shape the future plans of the company, but the essential or core information came from the 27-year non-exempt veteran who had witnessed it all. This person's informal story behind the ink

and paper provided valuable context that would help shape the success of newly implemented initiatives. Learning the nature of the business and the drivers of business success put the picture into 3-D and allowed a more complete story to emerge. Effective future program execution was largely fueled by that story. Clearly, tapping informal networks to gather a multiplicity of views made a significant difference in the trajectory of the young professional new to the organization. This chapter provides the reader with tools to continue the story.

Organizational memory (the body of data, information and knowledge relevant to an individual organization's existence) can be understood as a sociotechnical system. Our observation is that organizational documentation (including written policies, email, publicity, and employee surveys) is physically or electronically stored in the complex context of people, physical space, and other technologies. This interrelationship of people and technology makes up a sociotechnical system.

As a system, organizational memory is witnessed by many points of view that converge into a complete story. An individual witness cannot tell the story in a way that complete learning can take place. Documentation tells one story; the project or process manager involved tells another part; the leader has their story; the workers have theirs...add in customers, suppliers, the press, the current business climate and the possible points of view are endless.

Perception of the present is related to previous experience (and its memory conscious or unconscious). We selectively remember what fits a current schema. When we have no experience, i.e., memory that fits, we attempt to fill the hole to create a whole. While an "elegant" solution, it leads to a potential distortion. We assert that this is also true of organizational memory. Clearly a distortion of the past impacts present and future understanding. Gathering a multiplicity of views indirectly and through informal networks may lessen the distortion.

It all makes sense, but now we are making things complicated. We find the idea of sense-making useful here (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). David Snowden of the Cognitive Edge defines sense-making as how we make sense of the world so that we can act in it. It is an approach drawing from insights from the cognitive sciences and the science of complex adaptive systems. Knowing that we have to write our knowledge bases as if someone were looking at our organization for the first time is one thing but having to capture multiple points of view and organize them into a cohesive story seems complex and daunting.

Visual referencing is more prevalent in contemporary culture. Social networking online tools such as LinkedIn and Facebook; contextual and graphical search engine sites such as Silobreaker which shows the networks and relationships around a topic; and applied organizational consulting tools coming from academic settings. In particular, social network mapping is an applied tool to provide a visualization of the interaction of people and information. While a mind map, with its potential for brainstorming, depicts word ideas in a non-linear format, a social network map provides a tool to indicate informal network connections at various levels. Our minds alone cannot hold the complexity of this picture without a manual or computer-generated map. Given that picture, the beholder begins to make sense of the data. In this sense-making effort, opportunities emerge to be pursued toward organizational goals. This chapter provides best practice ideas and tools to create a knowledge system map which will help to identify the sources of the knowledge needed to capture a more complete picture of organizational culture.

INFORMAL NETWORKS FOR SUCCESS

Information is often gathered through formal channels following organizational roles and

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