

Chapter 5

Knowledge Management in the Public Service: The Case of the Singapore Health Promotion Board

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ABSTRACT

In the knowledge economy, Knowledge Management (KM) has gained strategic importance in management agenda in many organizations, including those in the service industries. This chapter presents the case study of the Singapore Health Promotion Board (HPB), as a study of how KM can be harnessed to improve public sector performance in an area where bottom-line performance is hard to define. By analysing the development of the HPB's "Healthier Hawker Programme," the case study examines the HPB's journey in using increasingly sophisticated KM processes, tools, and techniques. The experiences and lessons learnt during the HPB's KM journey are analysed and presented using the Learning with Knowledge (LK) Cycle, a model that is useful to the formation of an ontology for analytic discussion and the implementation of KM.

INTRODUCTION: KM IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE

With the emergence of the knowledge economy, many organizations now recognize knowledge as a critical resource to achieve sustainable competitive advantage (Davenport and Prusak,

2000; Drucker, 1988; Hertog and Huizenga, 2000). Knowledge Management (KM) has gained strategic importance in management agenda and there are formal KM programmes in many organizations. According to Nonaka (1991), knowledge creating companies constantly encourage the process whereby personal knowledge is made available

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to others (articulation) for them to use to extend their own tacit knowledge base (internalisation). Nonaka (1991) further argues that the key to competitive advantage lies latent within the organisation and the role of management is to provide a conceptual framework that helps employees to manage this knowledge. According to Chait (1999), knowledge management seeks to ensure that the right information is available to the right people, in the right places, at the right time, and that the individual knowledge elements are leveraged and multiplied in value. Most literature will argue that KM affects bottom-line performance in manufacturing industries, in enhancing production efficiency and increasing profits. However, in service industries, KM is harder to quantify but still can be measured by its effects on profitability. However, what is interesting is KM in the *public* service, in an area like health promotion where bottom-line performance is hard to define.

Global trends in public sector administration have reflected a shift from the bureaucratic stereotype, to one with an increased focus on citizen as customer in an effort to improve its efficiency and effectiveness. Singapore has been part of this trend and 1995 marked the launch of PS21 (or Public Service for the 21st Century), the umbrella movement for the transformation of its public service. This is a movement that urges the public service to embrace change, innovate and seek constant improvement (Ong, 2010). PS21 is designed to institutionalise processes, structures and a culture for organisational excellence and learning. Under the PS21 banner are several initiatives that promote service excellence, productivity, knowledge sharing, and innovation (Neo and Chen, 2007).

The PS21 movement seeks to bring about fundamental changes required of both the Singapore economy and public sector. It reflects the economic strategy to move Singapore towards the new knowledge driven economy. Evolving the public sector is seen as integral to reshaping the economy. One clear shift has been the steady

movement away from a system of rules and compliance to one in which principles and common values guide behaviour. This has helped to create and unlock new public value.

To allow for greater autonomy and flexibility in the implementation of policy, Singapore has historically set up Statutory Boards as autonomous entities with separate governance frameworks and the freedom to operate more like the private sector. While the day-to-day management and operations of a Statutory Board remain independent of the government, the ethos and philosophies remain that of the public service. One such Statutory Board is the Health Promotion Board (HPB). HPB was set up in 2001 as the national coordinating body to oversee all health promotion and ill health prevention efforts. The philosophy behind HPB is to promote a healthy lifestyle among Singaporeans, such as regular physical activities, a healthy diet, non-smoking lifestyle, good mental wellbeing, and the early detection of diseases through screening. The business of Health Promotion involves harnessing ideas, implementing them through collaborations and partnerships, and the marketing and selling of a healthy lifestyle as a product to citizens. The business model of HPB thus relies heavily on human capital and knowledge as key resources.

KM has been embedded as a key enabler of the organisation since HPB's formation. From the start, the principles and values of health promotion placed a heavy emphasis on evidence-based practice, reflecting its roots in epidemiology and the close links to medical practice and healthcare. This mindset is evident in the use of systematic literature reviews, data analysis and research to form the basis of programme design. As part of health promotion practice, officers routinely incorporate learning frameworks and evaluation methods to understand project success or areas for improvement.

As a study of how KM can be harnessed to improve public sector performance, a case study is now presented on the development of HPB's

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