

Knowledge Management and Learning: Mapping out a Learning Organization

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Knowledge Management is the science of how to process and capture the available sum of knowledge through out the organization that is useable. Knowledge itself is a combination of information and skills. But in today's world it is important to take into consideration any cultural filters.

1. *Information* comprises the meaning given to data or information obtained according to certain conventions; this is also known as explicit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).
2. *Culture* is the total amount of standards, values, views, principles and attitudes of people that underscore their behavior and functioning.
3. *Skills* are related to the capability, ability, and personal experience of people; it relates to what people can do, know and understand.

The knowledge components culture and skills represent *implicit knowledge*, which depends on the individual and is stored in the minds of people. This concept is difficult to describe, is based on experience, is practical in nature and finds its source, among other things, in associations, intuitions and fantasies.

Explicit knowledge, on the contrary, is not dependent on the individual, is theoretical in nature and is specified as procedures, theories, equations, manuals, drawings etc. This knowledge is mainly stored in management information and technical systems, and organizational routines.

The central question here is: how can knowledge be transformed into new behavior? Thus, how can people learn effectively so that they can function better? If knowledge is to lead to competent action, then learning should receive special attention, and the organizational culture and structure should stimulate and support this.

Knowledge ages rapidly and is liable to wear. That is why one should constantly learn. *Learning is a continuous personal transformation*. It is a cyclic and cumulative process of the continuous actualization of your knowledge (adding new things to your knowledge repertory), in order to change your behavior so you can function and act better. It is a permanent change in your knowledge and behavior partly due to repeated experiences.

Here the intention is improving the quality of your thinking and acting. In view of the increasing shift from *lifetime employment* to *lifetime employability*, people must make sure that their knowledge is up-to-date. An organization is indeed more successful if its employees learn quicker, and implement and commercialize knowledge faster than the workers of the competition. An organization that does not learn continuously and is not able to continuously list, develop, share, mobilize, cultivate, put into practice, review, and spread knowledge will not be able to compete effectively. That is why the ability of an organization to improve existing skills and acquire new ones forms its most tenable competitive advantage.

It is, therefore, imperative to constantly know which knowledge is essential, where it is available in the organization, which associate possesses this skill, how this knowledge can be adequately utilized, how it can be shared, how this provides added value and how it can be maintained. The knowledge infrastructure within the organization must be organized in such a way that effective team work, creativity, positive thinking, self confidence and a good learning environment are stimulated by; for example, the use of computers, Internet and Intranet, design of a knowledge-bank, presence of a library, continuous training, an auditorium, organization of brainstorm sessions, review meetings, etc.

With regard to this, it can also be mentioned that the ability of an organization to learn by experience depends on the willingness of its employees to think about problems, about the opportunity presented to associates to identify and solve common problems together, the willingness to intervene preventively, and the existence of a working atmosphere where every employee feels responsible for the company's performance. In practice, organizations especially seem to learn if employees have a sense of direction through a collective ambition (mission and vision), and work with all their might to realize this ambition.

Because of this, employees feel a strong common bond, which motivates them to learn together. Under these inspiring circumstances, they are also willing to share their knowledge with their colleagues and match their personal objectives with the ones of the organization. Through this, *learning organizations* emerge in which learning is collective and based on a personal and collective ambition.

Learning organizations have the ability to learn and facilitate all facets of the learning process and thus continuously transform themselves. Such organizations consist of teams with balanced learning styles, and people whose personal ambition corresponds to that of the organization. Because of this, they have a positive attitude towards improving, changing and learning. Learning organizations also consist of people who constantly learn from their own mistakes, share knowledge and communicate openly with each other. These organizations have leaders who coach, help, inspire, motivate, stimulate and intuitively make decisions, and have processes that are constantly reviewed based on performance measures and feedback. The management of

the knowledge stream within the organization is essential for this, as well as changing the way we think and deal with each other.

Peter Senge (1990) people must give up their traditional way of thinking, have to develop their own skills and be open to change, understand how the whole organization functions, formulate the shared vision of the organization together to try to fulfill this ambitious dream as a team. These basic elements of learning organizations are also based on people’s experiences. In practice it shows that the tempo with which the abilities of an organization increase are to a greater degree determined by the efficiency with which one learns from experiences. In order to obtain an optimum learning effect, people should have a certain educational level and specifically get the chance to acquire experience; this is because people with experience learn faster. Therefore, it is important to accept that every employee is able to learn and is motivated to do so, that learning is not a passive but active and continuous process and that associates need guidance in this process.

Knowledge Management Quick Scan

In order to increase organizational learning ability, insight is also needed in the present knowledge & learning available within the organizations.

Below is Dr. Hubert Rampersad Knowledge Management Quick Scan that was completed for an airline. This provides a frame of reference as to how to determine the knowledge available.

Example – Knowledge Management Quick Scan					
Dr. Hubert Rampersad					
<i>GENERAL</i>					
<i>Circle the correct number: 1 = never/no/not correct 2 = once in a while/a little/less 3 = frequent/usually 4 = always/yes/correct</i>					
1.	Making mistakes is allowed; failures are tolerated and not penalized. People learn from each other’s mistakes, and errors are openly discussed.	1	2	3 ●	4
2.	Employees know where particular knowledge can be found in the organization and it is transparent to everyone who knows what.	1 ●	2	3	4
3.	Employees get the space to think, learn (consciously as well as subconsciously), act, make informal contacts, gain experience, experiment and take risks.	1	2	3 ●	4
4.	Management information systems are integrated and continually updated.	1	2	3	4 ●

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<i>Circle the correct number: 1 = never/no/not correct 2 = once in a while/a little/less 3 = frequent/usually 4 = always/yes/correct</i>				
5. The necessary knowledge for important decisions is usually readily available and easily accessible.	1	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	3	4
6. There are no barriers for the use and exchange of knowledge.	1	2	3	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
7. Employees have the skills to adequately categorize, use and maintain knowledge.	1	2	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	4
8. The organization has a network of knowledge workers.	1	2	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	4
9. The organizational structure is simple, has few hierarchical levels and consists of autonomous units.	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	2	3	4
10. The organization is characterized by diversity (people with different cultural backgrounds and learning styles), a planned as well as intuitive approach, etc.	1	2	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	4
11. There is an active program for developing ideas. Based on this, new knowledge is continually generated.	1	2	3	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
12. There is no competition between colleagues. Internal competition is not stimulated.	1	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	3	4
13. In the organization there does not exist an atmosphere of fear and distrust.	1	2	3	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
<i>LEADERSHIP STYLE</i>				
14. Top management is committed to enlarging learning ability and creating a learning organization.	1	2	3	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
15. Employees are continually stimulated and encouraged to identify and solve shared problems as a team, brainstorm to generate creative ideas and share these with each other.	1	2	3	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
16. Managers have the knowledge important to organizational success	1	2	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	4
17. Managers fulfill the styles coaching, inspiring and serving leadership in an optimal mix. They stimulate a fundamental learning attitude, intensive knowledge exchange and internal entrepreneurship, and	1	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	3	4

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promote individual as well as team learning.				
18. Managers are continually focused on developing and mobilizing employee knowledge and regularly give constructive feedback about attempted improvement, development, and learning actions.	1	2●	3	4
19. Managers use simple oral and written language, are action oriented and facilitate the process “learning by doing.”	1	2	3●	4
20. Management knows which employees are the carriers of valuable and scarce knowledge. Sources of internal expertise have been mapped out.	1●	2	3	4
21. A knowledge manager, one who coaches and facilitates the learning processes, has been appointed. His most important skills are: understanding, processing, communicating and modifying knowledge.	1	2	3	4●
STRATEGIC VISION				
22. Knowledge management is a strategic theme that is part of the organizational ambition.	1	2	3	4●
23. There is continuous collective learning to develop the core competences of the organization.	1	2●	3	4
24. There are a minimum of 4 knowledge & learning objectives and related performance measures formulated in the corporate scorecard.	1	2	3	4●
25. Managers have formulated a minimum of 3 knowledge & learning objectives and related performance measures in their Personal Balanced Scorecard aligned to organizational ambition.	1	2	3	4●
26. Customer information is considered strategically valuable.	1	2	3●	4
INTERNAL PROCESSES				
27. Employees do not hoard knowledge but share it spontaneously with each other. Individuals, teams and business units systematically and intensively exchange knowledge with each other.	1●	2	3	4

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28. Knowledge growth is promoted through the organizational culture. This is a culture characterized by simplicity, open-communication and doing instead of talking too much.	1 ●	2	3	4
29. Problems are integral and are tackled methodically by a systems approach. For this purpose, procedures are drafted and used routinely.	1	2 ●	3	4
30. Knowledge gaps are systematically and continually mapped out and measures are taken to narrow and eliminate them.	1	2 ●	3	4
31. Relevant implicit knowledge is (as far as possible) made explicit through images and metaphors, reviewed, spread throughout the organization and intensively exchanged.	1 ●	2	3	4
32. User friendly communication and information systems are used to broadly spread knowledge among all employees.	1	2 ●	3	4
33. Obtained and developed knowledge is continually documented and made available to everyone in the organization.	1	2 ●	3	4
34. Employees with valuable and scarce knowledge rotate among different business units and participate in a variety of improvement teams.	1	2	3 ●	4
35. There is a learning environment characterized by positive thinking, self-esteem, mutual trust, willingness to intervene preventively, taking responsibility for business performances, openness, enjoyment, and passion. Employees are urged to continually study how they work and adjust it if needed.	1	2 ●	3	4
36. The learning processes are initiated and guided by existing or expected problems. Problems are seen as a chance to learn or change. Conflicts are seen as unsolved challenges.	1	2	3 ●	4
37. People work and learn together harmoniously in self-guiding teams. Here team members have knowledge overlaps, a balance of personalities, skills and learning styles and knowledge about their own favorite learning style and that of colleagues.	1	2	3 ●	4

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38. Knowledge is constantly being implemented and incorporated into new products, services and processes.	1	2	3●	4
39. Benchmarking is done systematically to gain knowledge. Best practices within and outside the organization are identified and propagated internally. That which is learned is generalized.	1	2	3	4●
40. Knowledge & learning indicators are measured constantly and used as the starting point for process improvement.	1	2	3	4●
41. Organizational knowledge is shared through informal contacts, internal lectures, conferences, problem solving and project review meetings, dialogue sessions, internal rapports, memos, etc.	1	2●	3	4
42. Knowledge sharing is facilitated through internet, intranet, library, comfortable meeting rooms, auditorium, computerized archive and documentation system, etc.	1	2●	3	4
43. Employees have varied and challenging work. There is task rotation.	1	2	3	4●
<i>HUMAN RESOURCES</i>				
44. Job appraisal is explicitly linked to the personal ambition of individuals and the shared ambition of the organization.	1	2	3	4●
45. Managers and employees are judged by what they do, not on how smart they seem and how much they talk.	1	2	3●	4
46. Employee knowledge is developed constantly and kept up-to-date by means of training, coaching and talent development programs.	1	2	3●	4
47. There is a proactive competence development policy, which includes internal and external training, courses, working conferences, symposia and seminars.	1	2●	3	4
48. Knowledge and learning competences are part of every employee's competence profile.	1	2	3	4●
49. The knowledge of departing employees is passed on to successors.	1●	2	3	4

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50. Employees who deliver collective learning performances for the sake of the entire organization’s well-being and constantly share their knowledge with colleagues are rewarded extra and have more promotion opportunities.	1	2	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	4
Total score:	138 points			
Remarks /Suggestions: improve localizing of knowledge, improve availability and accessibility:				

Strategies for increasing Organization’s Learning:

- Creating conditions whereby people are willing to apply their knowledge, share and intensively exchange it with each other
- Establishing the organizational structure in such a way that people get sufficient space and opportunities to gain experiences and think
- Stimulating employees to formulate their own Personal Balanced Scorecard and through this cultivate a positive attitude toward improvement, learning and developing.
- Letting employees reflect on the balance between their own personal ambition and the shared ambition of the organization
- Making an inventory of your learning style and aligning it to your personal ambition. Reviewing this periodically; aligning it to the planning, coaching and appraisal meetings and the 360°-feedback system
- Establishing improvement teams in which a balance of personalities, skills and learning styles is present
- Developing and accepting self knowledge regarding their own favorite learning style and the ones of other team members
- Giving people a sense of direction based on a shared ambition and linking them to each other
- Working with teams where team learning is central; teams that think and act from a synergetic perspective, and are well coordinated, with a feeling of unity
- Using images, metaphors and intuitions to share and exchange implicit knowledge

- Working with self-directing teams in an organizational network, using generalists with ample responsibilities and competences and where there are knowledge overlaps and task rotations between employees
- Stimulating employees to think about, identify and solve common problems as a team, let go of traditional ways of thinking, constantly develop their own skills, let them acquire experience and let them feel responsible for company and team performances
- Having leaders who coach, help, inspire, motivate and stimulate, are action oriented, and constantly evaluate processes based on performance measures
- Having people who continually learn from their mistakes and openly communicate with each other, and constantly apply Deming's and Kolb's learning cycles in their actions
- Systematically working with problem solving methods (brainstorming, problem solving cycle, risk management, etc.)
- Giving feedback about improvement actions undertaken
- Applying an integral and system approach
- Implementing a knowledge infrastructure; Internet, intranet, library, evaluation sessions, etc.
- Letting employees concentrate on everything that happens in the organization
- Stimulating informal employee contacts
- Driving out fear and mistrust from the organization
- Simplifying the organizational structure and management language
- Allowing mistakes. Without mistakes, there is no learning

References

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