CEOs Visualizing Knowledge Management

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An opportunity exists to develop useful and authentic Knowledge Management strategies for competitive advantage through facilitating organizational decision makers within their world, in terms of their reality and purposes instead of adapting existing thinking to this area and calling it Knowledge Management. Whilst HR specialists may connect knowledge with what people have learnt or their expertise, finance and marketing with intellectual property and databases, and IT with data warehouses, expert systems and internets, all three are united in connecting the idea of utilizing knowledge to create wealth through competitive advantage. For Knowledge Management to survive as something more than another fad, it may be timely to consult the individuals involved in leading the creation and delivery of new customer values about their requirements instead of imposing a functionally-driven agenda based on old products.

WORKSHOP PROCESS

The approach employed was to begin the process of attempting to redefine Knowledge Management by working backwards from its symptoms, by encouraging participants who are senior decision makers from different organizations to attempt to answer the questions:

“How would we be able to tell if we had successful Knowledge Management in our organizations? What would you notice; what would you see, hear, feel and taste in your environments? How would people behave and work together?”

This exercise in defining Knowledge Management through its symptoms involved running three workshops of limited duration (five hours) involving a total of 12 Chief Executives and Managing Directors from organizations varying in size from small-to-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to larger international organizations.

After introductions and a minor warm-up exercise, the intention was to work backwards from visualizing the symptoms of successful implementation of Knowledge Management as a strategy, summarizing the key messages, identifying the obstacles and the minor solutions, and then integrating these solutions into key strategies to deliver the reality of the original visions.

OUTCOMES

In all three workshops, the provocation of the idea and the interest and depth of discussion that developed around the success symptoms became more valuable than following the original process. This meant that discussion never got beyond synthesizing the visualized evidence of successful Knowledge Management into the key messages.

I have deliberately simplified the outcomes to make them easier to communicate. At present, there is a language vacuum. Other key outcomes of visualizing successful Knowledge Management in organizations include (Figure 1):

- tight-loose/hard-soft.
- Extra/Intramaps.
- visible people assets.
- applying what we know and making no repetitive mistakes.

Language Vacuum

At the heart of this language vacuum surrounding knowledge sits the word: know. Unfortunately knowledge or knowledge has a wide spread of meaning from remembering, being aware to recognition. We literally don’t know what we are talking about. At present, we are probably using the wrong words to describe something that is very important.

It is essential that we define the meaning and relationship between key words like data, information, technology and knowledge.

Perhaps, even the word management is insufficient.
Tight-Loose/Hard-Soft (TLHS)

Successful Knowledge Management requires a foundation of disciplines in order to free up time to dedicate to thinking creatively. This tight/hard discipline would enable and balance the loose/softer thinking necessary to develop and explore the Extra and Intramaps (discussed in the next section). A key discipline lies in the construction of process maps linking the Extra and Intramaps, processes that capture key skills and information, integrating learning and identifying and creating key individuals with special expertise. Process maps would also indicate areas of weakness.

The key activity of scouting would be a mixture of hard and soft disciplines as in the practice of Scenario Planning, employing creative disciplines, deliberate play and diverse thinking. Similarly, these disciplines would identify key assets and the risk that had to be managed around them. A minimal 20% proportion of time would be dedicated to scouting.

A core discipline within TLHS includes what we might call Conducive Environment Management (this was chosen because Impression Management was seen as too overtly manipulative). This could include the integrated use of psychology, semiotics and architecture to manage physical environments to facilitate useful emotional and psychological states. These specifically designed environments could include entry and exits for different types of customer and partner, and the use of specific thinking locations to influence useful psychological states through tools analogous to Jung’s dream colours[1], de Bono’s thinking-hats[2], Feng-Shui practice and music.[3]

Extra Intramaps

The Extramap is a map or model of the world outside the organization. The word map is useful because it suggests a journey, identifiable locations, destinations, distances and routes. This Extramap is the stuff of nightmares because new locations will appear and grow, whilst some older locations will shrink and become excluded from routes or finally disappear, and journeys will tend to diminish between known locations.

The Extramap is the product of both hard and soft thinking, including scouting and playing in the form of scenario development, planning and risk management. The Extramap indicates which doors are closing and shrinking and which are opening, growing and changing shape. The Extramap includes our customers and the practice of new thinking that reverses the traditional direction of supply chain management from downstream into the supply chain into upstream, to develop proactive customer management, locating customers within a portfolio structure that evaluates their usefulness to the longer-term future of the organization.
The relationship between the Extra and Intramaps can be in one direction or two-way. The Intramap can either be a response to the Extramap, or the Intramap can be configured to deliberately create an effect upon the Extramap.

This means that developing knowledge will involve working across the dimension of time to construct Extra and Intramaps to influence and create new opportunities.

The Intramap is our model or map of how we configure to exploit and operate within the Extramap. Intramaps include explicit processes of how we do things, embodying what has been learnt in the past to ensure no repetitive mistakes. Also indicated among the Intramaps are areas of weakness. Another aspect of the Intramaps could include the locations of partners and suppliers and connecting processes that they populate.

Both types of map require scouting, map-making and navigational skills (continually reworking the map, removing dead bits, connecting new talum and reference points; measuring connections that are both hard and soft, including the consideration of soft possibilities that are personal, metaphorical, subjective and potential). Both types of map are used to create new expectations through creative anticipation. Both maps would include and be connected by a time dimension that would include a consideration of how they were before, how they are now and could be in the future. The capture and analysis of these maps in time might perhaps be modelled through the evolutionary virtual technology featured within Crichton’s novel Disclosure encouraging creative kinaesthetic aspects (i.e., accidental learning through touching and playing with models).[4]

Extra and Intramaps are connected by ‘tangible’ processes that make up the Value-Creating Formula (VCF). This Value-Creating Formula is modelled and captured in this virtual, kinaesthetic technology containing embedded layers of information and useful tools and the cues for recognizing new, evolving situations and for turning on appropriate techniques. The basis of the Value-Creating Formula is an awareness of its components, their vulnerability to risk, and a serious consideration of the VCF and its customers in terms of their relative life-cycles.

Visible People Assets

A strong and consistent theme throughout was that of people visibility, suggesting that Knowledge Management means we will find a way to ‘see’ our people without turning them into commodities.

This visibility included being able to see what the individual was good at outside of their functional context (a key issue in positioning what have been functional directors into new process-roles within new process organizations). This visibility includes individuals’ positioning within the Intramap processes and a consideration of managing the risk around key individuals becoming narrow bottlenecks in key processes and interfaces with the Extramap such that they accrue political power based on closed expertise. Recruitment will be on the potential of the individual to grow and contribute to the business. The accent has become to work with the organization, and not for it.

Applying What We Know And Making No Repetitive Mistakes

The combination of TL/HS thinking underpinned by the necessary disciplines to free up time to practise soft/loose thinking to develop the Extra and Intramaps is fundamental to Knowledge Management or whatever we decide to call it.

Knowledge Management is about deciding to be in control of those things that are worth controlling and deliberately out of control in those things that are best left free. One of the problems in modern organizations can be the political need to pretend that key processes are being controlled. Knowledge Management is about deliberately mistake-proofing the organization and understanding the nature of the opportunities.

Successful Knowledge Management will be a product of choosing to change the way we think, of deliberately paying attention to what we know about thinking processes and our ability to create information out of date and put it into a context where it has new meaning.

THE PROBLEM OF INVENTING THE FUTURE OF THE ORGANIZATION

The problems at the heart of managing an enterprise are two-fold: how to invent the future and the art of managing attention. We tend to believe that those who fail to learn the lessons of history will be forced to relive the past in a new, sometimes unrecognizable form; and that we have an opportunity to invent the future by understanding the past.
Once we begin to develop an understanding of how organizations function, the problem of attention expands and becomes more difficult. The more we learn, the wider our experience, the more we know, the easier it becomes to become too focused upon a small area and to reinforce that growing expertise in depth at the expense of a broader picture.

What is known is that by using creativity to reinvent work, we apply our interest and attention in continuous and creative Hawthorne effects where novelty or interest in a new situation leads, at least initially, to positive results upon our world to see it renewed and transformed.\[5\]

In the original nine-dot problem we are asked to connect all nine dots using only four continuous, straight lines.\[6\] When we attempt this problem for the first time, we tend to draw the lines within the frame of three dots by three dots, and fail to connect all of them. Ultimately, we learn that by extending three of the lines out of the original box-shape of three dots by three dots so that our lines look like an arrow-head, we can connect all nine dots (Figure 2).

From this analogy, we can develop two useful ideas about creativity and organizations: firstly, if we take the 3 x 3 dots as a framework of how we see the organization, we note our tendency to remain trapped within existing mental models, models that are treated as givens. And that secondly, in order to understand the organization we may have to deliberately alienate ourselves by searching for new perspectives from which to construct new models or organization that allow us to reconfigure our processes for paying attention and identifying opportunities.

It is this search for new opportunity and success through the continuous construction and destruction of models accompanied by the search for and occupation of new perspectives that enables us to introduce new Hawthorne effects to promote attention and invent the future or organizations. Visualizing successful Knowledge Management in our organizations is part of this process.

**IMPLICATIONS**

**Exploring The Future Organization By Visualizing Knowledge Management**

There are several advantages and dangers involved in attempting this process. Risks in this exercise begin with its ambiguity. Novelty and timing mean that the outcomes may be influenced by participants’ confusing their received visions of modernity, or how the business media believe fashionably ‘modern’ organizations should look.\[7,8\] An additional risk is present in an audience reviewing the outcome as merely common-sense, and the interpreters or facilitators only including those elements that fitted in with their own preconceptions.

The keyword: knowledge, is ambiguous. This very ambiguity is very useful because like the Learning Organization concept, it promotes creative interpretation and this is reinforced by the absence of convincing definitions and examples. The balancing danger lies in the timing of the undefined product: ‘Knowledge Management’ coming towards the end of the Business Process Re-engineering fad when organizations are only really just beginning to struggle to respond to Peter Drucker’s ideas of knowledge leadership and knowledge currency.\[9, 10\] At the same time, specialists are attempting to repackage and reposition their existing repertoire within the new ‘Knowledge Management’ brand to sell us more.

The current Knowledge Management literature is dominated by mindsets of prevailing specialisms that begin with the idea of knowledge as an asset, yet their approaches tend to reinforce an existing specialist repertoire without attempting to develop an understanding of the keyword: knowledge.

This asset approach leads to the valuation of intellectual property, product and customer databases, individuals and everything they may have learnt. Whilst all or a combination of these
approaches reinforce the primacy of existing experts and their highly-developed repertoires, there is no evidence of an approach to Knowledge Management being developed that is truly holistic or which actually represents the language, reality and needs of decision-makers in business organizations striving to create and deliver new customer values.

There is another aspect that we need to consider, and that is the dimension of time and how it relates to present concepts of knowledge.

**KNOWLEDGE, COMPETITIVENESS AND TIME**

Picture, if you will: a CEO entering the boardroom and asking a series of fundamental questions about knowledge:

“What do we know that gives us strategic leadership and opportunity, how ready are we to exploit it, where does it sit within our risk and reward framework and how long have we got before someone copies us or reverse-engineers our idea and it becomes public domain?”

At this point, the real issue about knowledge cannot be what we know about the past, but the question of what do we know about the future?

This then leads us to the next realization: that we need to distinguish between knowledge about the past and a new form of knowledge that is about the future, that relates to the psychology of direction - changing the way we think about the future, by making us accept new discontinuities, visualizing and accepting them, changing our mindsets about what is possible.[11] The key weakness of existing thinking about knowledge is its being rooted in the past, in documenting what has occurred and how it happened in order to facilitate its re-occurrence. Not that such thinking is obsolete, but that it is driven by a paradigm of taxonomies, of demarcating what has happened, about what is known and how it was delivered and not about knowledge that has the potential to create the future.

Another issue is related to benchmarking and knowledge. As soon as you do something in the market-place, it becomes accessible and through emulators begins to slide into the public domain. Perhaps the key to successful Knowledge Management in organizations will be about deciding to balance documenting the past with an emphasis on creating new knowledge to deliver the future.

The trick to being continuously competitive is about being someone else’s benchmark, about quickly learning to invent the future so that everyone else is always trying to catch up with where you have just been. In this case, knowledge about the future will be created by the use of new techniques like Fantasy Benchmarking.

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**References**


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