Sharing Knowledge
Problems, Root Causes, and Solutions
Pre-publication version for clients

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Sir Francis Bacon, back in the sixteenth century, was first credited as saying, “Knowledge is power.” His declaration became part of our common vernacular, and it proved true for several centuries. But today, Bacon’s wisdom has largely lost its luster. In the knowledge age, “knowledge” is not power; rather, the “***sharing*** of knowledge” brings power.

The true value of knowledge can only be achieved and realized when knowledge is shared among people. It is through such sharing that improvements are made, new ideas are generated, and innovations occur.

Sharing knowledge can improve processes and speed staff assimilation. It can stop the all-too-common pattern of “reinventing the wheel.” And it can reduce waste and improve productivity. Many positive outcomes result from sharing knowledge more effectively.

Birth of a knowledge-sharing Initiative

As a vice president of a global consulting and contract research firm wit over twenty-five years of consulting experience, I saw this shift first hand. Because of competitive pressures in a changing business environment, our firm found sharing knowledge an increasingly important factor in its success – sharing across consulting practices, among offices, and around the world. Sharing knowledge more effectively would bring significant benefits for the firm. It would help us to sell more competitively, deliver services more profitably, and deliver higher valued services. It would help us to grow allowing us to assimilate staff faster and more effectively and by enriching and enhancing our products. And it would create value by helping us to develop and leverage proprietary technology and consulting products.

In response to the competitive pressures we faced, we embarked on several programs to unify its far-flung operations. We introduced an international sales and support effort to meet the needs of its global clients. We undertook a strategic program to ensure that it showed a single face across the world. And we launched an initiative to ensure that the firm’s global knowledge and expertise was effectively leveraged to the benefit of its clients, staff members, and the firm as a whole.

I was asked by the CEO to establish the firm’s Knowledge Management (KM) function. Working with a hand-picked team, I developed and won approval for the KM strategy, governance structure, operational plan, and budget from Executive Committee and Board. I then led the effort to create the firm’s “knowledge taxonomy,” establishing the logic structure for key data about staff, clients, projects, products, tools, “learnings,” and reusable methodologies.

With a core staff of eight KM specialists, I led the effort to define and deploy critical KM processes, and to appoint, train, and support 120 Knowledge Stewards to ensure on-going capture of reusable information company-wide. My team embedded KM into the firm’s culture, creating physical/virtual “communities of practice,” networks, intermediary roles, and events to share explicit and tacit knowledge.

The effort was launched in six months, with 10,000 initial “knowledge objects” providing information on clients and employees worldwide. We introduced leading-edge collaboration tools, including electronic bulletin boards, video conferencing, mini-repositories, and shared document access. System usage was closely monitored and driven higher; in two years, it grew to 137,000 “pages viewed” per month. More important, the initiative was beginning to have the anticipated effects that senior management had projected for the firm’s bottom line.

Emergence of a knowledge-sharing problem

Thus, much was done to foster increased sharing of knowledge and expertise. But after three years of increasing success, we were surprised and disappointed when we discovered that people were not contributing and sharing content as planned. The question was, "Why?" Everyone said the answer was obvious – our consultants were simply independent, self-absorbed experts. "Of course," people said, "Experts do not share because to them, 'Knowledge is Power'" – by which they meant that our experts hoarded their personally gained knowledge as a sign of their position and rank.

That answer troubled me. After two decades in the firm, I knew from personal experience that consultants from across the organization shared their knowledge and expertise fully and freely when working on a specific client's assignment. There had to be something beyond "knowledge is power" at work.

I decided to dig deeper, to try to identify the root causes of the non-sharing behavior that had been observed. We conducted interviews of a sample of the firm's professionals at multiple levels and in different offices. We also executed a broad survey related to our KM initiative, with attitudes and behaviors on sharing as key components.

As I had suspected, the root cause of the lack of contribution to our knowledge repository and the general lack of sharing – was definitely ***not*** protecting one's knowledge turf. Instead, we found three underlying reasons people were not sharing knowledge.

First, people craved civility. They wanted to be asked, "Please" before they gave up their knowledge, and they wanted to be told, "Thank you" after the transfer had taken place. The impersonal nature of our computer-based access to our knowledge repository eliminated peoples' ability to have these sorts of interactions.

The second reason was equally important – and even more significant. People who had expertise were genuinely and correctly concerned that their "knowledge," now captured out of context in a document of some sort, might be applied inappropriately by the new user. They feared that used in such a way, their knowledge might lead to the wrong conclusions – to the potential detriment of the client, themselves, and the firm.

What they wanted was the opportunity to have a brief conversation with the requester to learn the basics of the problem being addressed and why their knowledge was being sought. Then, they wanted the chance to provide caveats and advice to ensure that their knowledge would be properly applied.

Third, experts said that some knowledge simply could not be reduced to a few words on a page. Such knowledge was in the realm of wisdom and what Professor Dorothy Leonard of the Harvard Business School calls, "Deep Smarts[1]." This type of knowledge can only be shared within a very-well-understood context, and it demands interaction between the requester and the expert for such sharing to take place.

I have come to see the need for interaction between requester and expert – be it the quick call or email, or the more intensive discussion – to be present in most instances where experts in less scientific/engineering domains are asked to share their knowledge. Such experts are most willing to share their knowledge, but are seriously concerned that their knowledge be used safely and effectively.

Problem solved

So what did we do? The first thing we did was to acknowledge to our user community that we recognized there were valid reasons people might not be willing to simply pour all of their knowledge into our common pot (i.e., our repository). We noted that people wanted the courtesy of a "please" and "thank you." We also made it clear that some knowledge was best not shared openly – and, at times, could not be shared simply through words on a page. In such cases, context and discussion would be needed before knowledge could be safely and effectively used. Finally, we provided the solution to these issues.

It turns out that much of the solution was already in place. We already had the facility for a knowledge holder to add an abstract of his/her content – and to require that the requester call or send an email to gain access to the actual knowledge. And we had made the calling/emailing relatively painless. Phone numbers were available in the companion staff directory. Sending emails was even easier. Where a knowledge-holder's name appeared, it was accompanied by an envelope icon; by clicking on the icon, the requester could send an email referencing the desired content – from directly within the knowledge portal application.

We also modified our training programs to share these issues and solutions with staff members. Especially with more junior consultants, we stressed the importance of communicating directly with experts to ensure that those experts' knowledge would be used appropriately.

Other knowledge-sharing problems

Sorry, no time – Sometimes people don't share because they don't have the time. When people are under time pressure, they think they can solve a problem by themselves faster than they can if they ask others for help – especially if the others are not known to them – and sitting right next door. Such situations are one of several causes of the productivity blocker known as "reinventing the wheel."

One remedy for such situations is to make it easier to find answers – by proactively developing social networks among employees, or by providing easy-to-use equivalents to yellow pages so that staff can quickly find trusted sources of knowledge. A second solution is to make it clear that reinventing the wheel is not an accepted form of behavior. By rewarding sharing and penalizing reinvention, an organization can impact and change people's behaviors.

Not as much fun – At other times, some people would really *rather* reinvent the wheel than leverage someone else's knowledge and have a problem solved. Such people get strong feelings of accomplishment from analyzing problems and meeting new challenges by themselves. To them, such activities provide personal enjoyment and enhance self-worth.

The solution in this case is more challenging. Reinvention may have become a key element in job satisfaction, so simply penalizing it could have serious undesirable side effects. One way to address this issue is to institute a new requirement for sign-off on significant decisions that requires the requester to show he/she has contacted a fellow-employee somewhere else in the organization to get his/her inputs – not with a requirement to follow any advice given, but rather only to discuss and listen.

During these discussions, the requesters often learn things that can significantly improve their cases and the likelihood of management approval. If a person is faced with a good idea – or better yet, a proven solution – he/she will be hard pressed to ignore what's been heard and insist on starting from scratch.

No simply way – At times, people don't share knowledge because they don't have the means to share. They may not know who has the knowledge they need. Or, it may be that the organization has not kept such knowledge. And even if the knowledge is there – somewhere – there may be no effective way for a person to locate and access it.

In such situations, building social networks, developing yellow pages, creating repositories, and providing knowledge portals can all be elements of the solution.

Not my job – In organizations with a piecework or piecework-like model, where people are paid for the number of widgets they assemble or number of applications they process, there is a negative reward – a penalty – for taking the time out to share knowledge. Helping others can actually reduce their pay.

While promoting the value of knowledge sharing can't hurt, it probably won't go very far toward solving this type of problem. In these environments, the piecework model has to be opened up with other rewards to enable experts to share what they know without penalizing them for doing so. Lower quotas and/or higher piece rates can do this.

Knowledge really is power – Regrettably, in some cases, the long-held belief that "knowledge is power" *can* be a driving force in the failure to share knowledge. It can result from several factors, the most important being where knowledge is the primary currency in getting and keeping a job. In such situations, people's value is measured largely by what they know, or what knowledge assets they have. In such organizations, the reward system, role models, and one's relative position in the organizational pecking order all strongly support the "knowledge is power" syndrome.

Such situations create a highly competitive work environment, one in which *not* openly and freely sharing knowledge is the unwritten rule. It takes some serious *quid pro quo* or strong outside pressure to break the rule and share.

And many, many more – These half-dozen reasons for the failure to share knowledge simply scratch the surface. Two recent articles uncovered myriad barriers to the effective sharing of knowledge:

- Peter Yih-Tong Sun and John L. Scott conducted a Delphi study and identified 39 barriers, as well as multiple sources of barriers at the individual, team, and organizational levels.[2]

- Andreas Riege reviewed current KM and related literature and identified 36 barriers, which he categorized as individual, organizational, and technological.3

Based on my experience, the most- frequent barriers include:

Personal

- No time to share
- Don't know whom to call
- Poor social networks connecting people
- Little faith that knowledge will be used appropriately
- Low levels of trust between individuals

Organizational

- Poor alignment of knowledge initiatives with corporate goals and objectives
- Ineffective communication of the value proposition for knowledge sharing
- Low ranking of knowledge initiatives among management's key programs
- Lack of shared values
- Work environment that stifles sharing
- Poor "any-to-any" communications channels or infrastructure
- Incentive system that inhibits knowledge sharing
- Highly competitive internal environment
- "Knowledge" as the primary currency for advancement

Technological

- Technology tools that fail to support and promote knowledge sharing
- Failure to build comfort in using technology tools

While all of these barriers certainly don't doom knowledge sharing, they can make it a very challenging endeavor. The following paragraphs will discuss ways to identify and mitigate the root causes of knowledge-sharing problems.

Finding root causes

To identify the reasons – and root causes – that knowledge is not being shared effectively requires observation, inquiry, and analysis. At times, the reasons for a lack of sharing are obvious and can be easily observed. A piecework environment is an example of situation with an obvious reason for non-sharing, and in such an environment, the obvious reason for a lack of sharing *is* the root cause.

While reviewing the lists in articles such as those mentioned above can provide initial insights, it does not necessarily identify the root causes that must be solved. As we saw in the consulting-firm example, the immediate answer is not always the root cause of the failure to share knowledge effectively. The initial reason given there – that "knowledge is power" – was be a *symptom*, or a possible explanation, but not the root cause.

In the consulting firm, the initial reason might just as well have been, "people don't have time to share." Had that been the case, we might have discovered that those people didn't have time because the organization pressured them to be billable at the expense of sharing knowledge. Or, we might have found that people didn't make the time to share knowledge because they perceived that such sharing to be unappreciated and unrewarded.

Where there is a need to dig further, interviews and/or surveys can help to uncover root causes, as they did in the consulting example. The objective in such situations is to probe further, and identify the causal factors of observed behavior.

A key tool in identifying the root causes that knowledge is not shared is the word, "why." With the "why technique," the investigator takes a page from the average five-year-old and repeatedly asks, "Why?" And whatever the response, the investigator asks, "Why?" again, and again…

Often, the investigator also uses a set of categories to prompt questions and structure responses. For example, in a knowledge-sharing situation, the categories might be "individual, organizational, and technological," or "reward system, role models, and official communications." The investigator might ask, "Are there any technology barriers to sharing knowledge?" Or, "Is there anything in the reward system that impacts on how you share knowledge?"

After a more coherent reason is identified, it is often necessary to revert back to the why technique. If the reason is, "People don't share because they can't find the knowledge they need," you could start asking why that knowledge isn't available. Is it because the extraction and codification of knowledge isn't valued? Is it that there is no system to manage or provide access to the knowledge that has been captures? Is it that people don't know that the knowledge exists? Or is it that people don't know how to access the knowledge?

The key is to continue to ask, "Why?" until you are certain you have reached a root cause.

However, in analyzing very complex knowledge-sharing issues, basic interviews and surveys often do not go far enough or dig deep enough. In such situations, a more structured tool, such as the "Seven Methods" model discussed below, may be required.

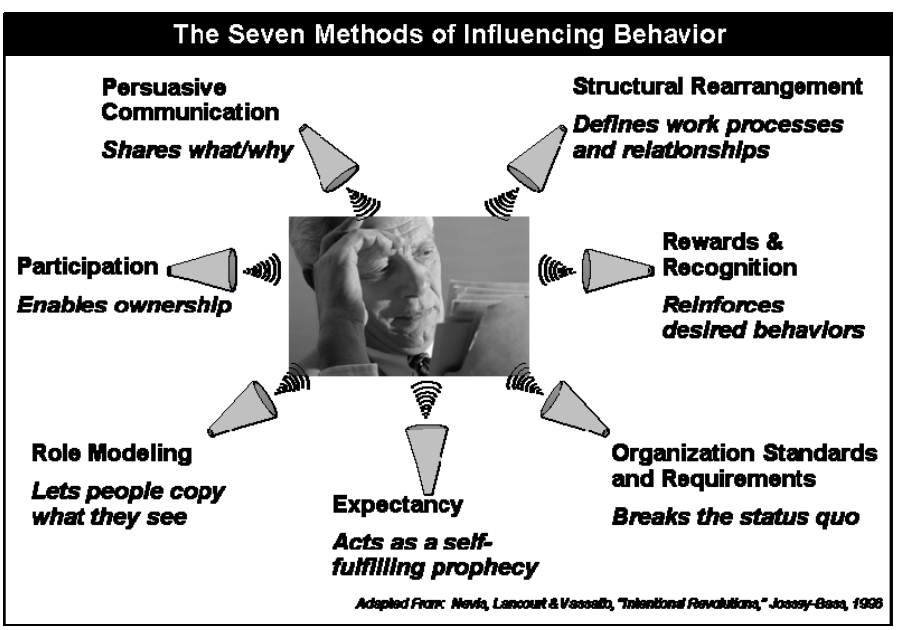
Introducing a tool

The enlightened self-interest of the individual is a key factor in the analysis and mitigation of barriers to knowledge sharing. We all do what we perceive to be in our best interest, and that perception is a product of an individual's life experience and a set of organizational factors. While managers cannot change life experience, they do have the power to shape and mold the work environment to help ensure desired behaviors – in this case, knowledge sharing.

The "Seven Methods of Influencing Behavior" is a tool that can help identify barriers to knowledge sharing and develop initiatives to mitigate them. This tool was first described in "Intentional Revolutions"[4] and further developed by Dr. Joan Lancourt and myself.

The model states that there are "Seven Methods" that influence behavior.

- *Persuasive communication* – messages from the organization and its managers that share what is happening, what should be done, and why
- *Participation* – messages from co-involvement and community that enable the individual to take ownership of goals, objectives, and ideas
- *Role modeling* – messages from others, especially role models who embody accepted forms of behavior



- *Expectancy* – messages emanating from the *expected* behavior of others that influence the behavior of the individual

- *Organizational standards and requirements* – messages from "rules" which, if followed, can make or break the status quo

- *Rewards and recognition* – messages from incentive programs that impact individual action

- *Structural rearrangement* – messages from organizational changes that redefine processes and relationships

In the everyday world, each of these "Seven Methods" is constantly broadcasting its message across the organization. Most often, these messages are sent independently of one another, with no coordination among or between them. When the messages are in harmony, they have a positive impact on the individual and what he/she perceives to be in his/her enlightened self-interest. But when the messages are dissonant, they can promote confusion and inconsistent actions among staff members, can ultimately block any initiative's progress, and even create chaos.

Imagine a situation in which a manager says one thing, but does another. How are those two conflicting messages interpreted by the individual? Which one is to be given precedence? Alternatively, what happens when a manager says to do something, but the incentive system penalizes that thing and rewards its opposite?

By understanding the messages and their impact, it is possible to identify the dissonance and plan multiple interventions over time. The messages can be relatively easily discerned by a combination of observation, interviews, and/or surveys. With this understanding, the messages can be modified and brought into alignment with whatever the change that management is trying to achieve – in our case, more effective knowledge sharing.

Developing a solution

Once root causes that block knowledge sharing are surfaced, the next challenge is to mitigate them. Here, the concept of the "Seven Methods" can play a central role.

Managers have a choice of several levers that they can push or pull in an attempt to modify employee behavior. But, as explained above in the discussion of the "Seven Methods" tool, it is critical to ensure alignment of the messages employees receive from multiple sources.

An approach to ensure such alignment is to consider the "Seven Methods," asking:
- What messages is each method sending today?
- What messages need to be sent to mitigate the root causes that have been identified?
- What further adjustment in the messages is needed to ensure continued alignment?

In the consulting-firm example, the "Seven Methods" tool was used to help develop a set of initiatives to counter the lack of knowledge sharing:

- In "Communication," messages were broadcast to acknowledge the valid reasons knowledge was not being shared, to reiterate the importance of sharing, and to advise people on how their knowledge could be shared civilly and safely

- In "Role Modeling," a concerted effort was undertaken to promote knowledge sharing by key managers and thought leaders – the role models in the organization.

- In "Structural Rearrangement," the processes for identifying and linking to experts were enhanced.

- In "Participation," multiple efforts were undertaken to involve staff members at all levels in programs and events related to the KM initiative and knowledge sharing.

A caveat: Pushing and pulling management levers can often have unanticipated and unintended negative side effects. Thus, after the newly aligned messages have been sent and had their initial effects, it is necessary to circle back and analyze whether management's actions have had the desired effect – or its opposite. Have behaviors begun to change, and has the level of knowledge sharing begun to improve? If the trajectories are not as desired, it is necessary to revisit and review the messages once more. In the most complex situations, it can take three or four iterations to "turn the battleship" and set knowledge sharing on a positive course.

An Example of Clear Messaging

One of the organizations that has been on the forefront of successful knowledge sharing is British Petroleum. Lord John Brown, CEO, has been a major force in transforming the organization from an also-ran to a world performance leader.

In the case of BP, consistent communication from the top has played a major role in the success of knowledge management and the business itself. In John Browne's own words:

> "…anyone in the organization who is not directly accountable for making a profit should be involved in creating and distributing knowledge that the company can use to make a profit."[5]

The consistency and clarity of Browne's communications sent clear messages down and across the organization. In addition, he was an active participant in knowledge activities, and thus established himself as a clear role model for his people.

Summary

Sharing knowledge has always played a role in an enterprise's success. But today, with global competitive pressures, a changing business environment, and a knowledge-centric economy, sharing knowledge has become a ***critical*** factor in that success.

Both research and empirical observation have pointed to myriad reasons that knowledge is not shared easily or effectively within organizations. The challenge for each organization is to uncover the root causes of the lack of knowledge sharing in its own environment, and to determine ways to mitigate those root causes.

For successful implementation of knowledge sharing, a tool such as the "Seven Methods of Influencing Behavior" can play a key role in both uncovering the root causes of the lack of knowledge sharing and removing them.

Footnotes

1. Leonard, Dorothy, and Walter Swap, *Deep Smarts*, (Harvard Business School Press, 2005)
2. Sun, Peter Yih-Tong and John L. Scott, "An investigation of barriers to knowledge transfer" (Journal of Knowledge Management, Volume 9, Number 2, 2005, pp. 75-90).
3. Riege, Andreas, "Three-dozen knowledge-sharing barriers managers must consider" (Journal of Knowledge Management, Volume 9, Number 3, 2005, pp. 18-35).
4. Nevis, Edwin C., Joan Lancourt, and Helen G.Vassallo, *Intentional Revolutions* (Jossey-Bass, 1996)
5. Prokesch, Steven E., "Unleashing the Power of Learning: An Interview with British Petroleum's John Browne" (Harvard Business Review, Volume 75, Number 5, September-October 1997, pp. 146-68)

Author's Biography
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Larry Chait, Managing Director of Chait and Associates, Inc., enables senior managers and their teams to leverage their internal knowledge to achieve and sustain high performance. He brings 40 years of experience in knowledge management, business process improvement, and change management. He also supports clients as an insightful executive and team coach.

As a 23-year veteran of Arthur D. Little, Inc., Larry was VP and Chief Knowledge Officer, responsible for the launch of ADL's formal KM function – establishing KM processes, inducting 120 Knowledge Stewards, and embedding KM into the culture.

Larry is also President of the Boston KM Forum, a Community of Practice for people involved in KM that sponsors 28 learning events a year. He has authored three books and 20 articles, lectured in seven post-graduate programs, and spoken at 40 conferences.

Larry received his A.B. in Economics from Cornell University and his M.B.A. from the Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration.