The Olds Institute: Towards a Communication Model of the Knowledge-Based Organization

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ABSTRACT

This article uses an exploratory qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with leaders of one rural knowledge-based organization (KBO) in Canada to underscore a longstanding but key conceptual disconnect within the management literature, viz. between knowledge as a fundamental human process based in communication, and knowledge as an organizational property or function expressed in terms of technology and/or business process. After making the case for adopting a knowledge-as-communication approach, including where support for the approach can be found in recent work in the complexity sciences, critique of a recent management model of the KBO specifically is offered. The centrality of the rural KBO’s governance model in particular is then examined as embodying a communications focus both tacitly (operationally at the everyday level) and explicitly (reflectively at the senior executive level). Insights gleaned suggest an overall theoretical and research orientation to organizational knowledge in general and the KBO specifically where communication is built into the organization on deep level.

Keywords: Communication, Complexity Science, Knowledge, Knowledge-Based Organization, Knowledge Management

INTRODUCTION

The truly important problems managers face do not come from technology or politics; they do not originate outside of management and enterprise. They are problems caused by the very success of management itself. –Peter Drucker

One problem stemming from the century-long success of management as a field and domain of study is the relative intractability of its core language games (Wittgenstein 1959). Mintzberg (2004), for example, has long critiqued the extent to which management research, theory and education is at once heavy on appropriating concepts from other knowledge domains but light on allowing them to actually enrich its ruling epistemology. This is a critique amply evidenced by the extent to which management has (mis)appropriated ‘knowledge’ itself, and by implication ‘knowledge management’ (Wolfe 2003) and now, putatively, ‘knowledge-based organization.’ The critique is further evidenced by the extent to which theorists with an interest in management have often been at pains to not define the concept lest they get bogged down in philosophical quagmires (Cilless 1998;
Davenport & Prusak 1998; Cilliers 2000). The overall result is an expansive constellation of domains of management and organizational study oriented to knowledge by name yet around which the concept of ‘knowledge’ itself still oscillates between two primary and often competing poles of thought: knowledge as forms of pragmatic action (skills), increasingly grounded in and aided by information technology applications; and, knowledge as a formal (i.e. structural) property accruing to the organization itself as embedded temporarily in the people who comply with abstract rules and structures as they enact it in their day-to-day and strategic work.¹

Depicting management and organizational design and study as polarized in this way is something of a simplification, of course. Management emphasizing an IT conception of knowledge has recently been challenged by and is responding to the sheer scale, depth and generational issues associated with the interactive web and so-called social media applications. In this emerging landscape, the onus of information-based knowledge creation and control falls back onto the individual, thereby altering the whole employee contract and the roles of technology and management itself within the organization (Wolfe, in press). At the same time, the management emphasis on knowledge as a structural property (Giddens 1984; Bourdieu 2006) of the organization has come under serious pressure from more recent models within the so-called complexity sciences that recover the biological, and therefore individual, basis of knowledge from which the organization itself derives as a system-level property – viz. through the typically non-linear interaction first and foremost of individuals (Maturana 1970; Maturana & Varela 1987 (1998); Maturana 1988; Stacey 1990; 1996; Lissack 1997; 2000; Lissack & Roos 1999; Stacey 2000; 2001). However, notwithstanding these refinements to emerging management conceptions of knowledge, a primary problem at both ends of the polarized view offered above remains: better understanding how knowledge arises and is nurtured in the first place such that the processes implicated create conditions for organizational sustainability and success.

This paper uses qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews to depict and draw insights from the governance model of the Olds Institute – one rural knowledge-based organization of import in Western Canada that both embodies on a operational level the notion of knowledge as based most essentially in communicative behaviour, and is reflectively conceived at the executive level as sustained in communication processes over time. After better making the case that communication is the natural domain for defining and deploying a concept of knowledge in the organizational context – including a brief examination of where the conceptual fit between complexity theory and KM specifically supports this approach – Zack’s (2003) four-fold model of the knowledge-based organization specifically is reviewed as an example of the propensity within management to not only deploy concepts from outside the field in a largely superficially way but where the very communication dynamics under discussion in this paper are implicitly assumed. Findings from the analysis are then reviewed in detail, followed by discussion and conclusion sections that point to the main issues at play in the paper, the strengths and limitations of the research herein described, and the extent to which the overall argument is highly supportive in re-thinking theoretical and practical approaches to researching the knowledge-based organization.

COMMUNICATION BASIS FOR KNOWLEDGE

To some extent, delving into the question of how knowledge anywhere arises in the first place requires precisely the kind of deep dive conceptually that management normally has been loathe to undertake (Davenport & Prusak 1998; Cilliers 2000). Fortunately, though, recent thinking within biology re-affirms evidence-based conceptual models that avoid the ephemerality of purely philosophical debate and at the same...
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