Chapter XVII

Organisational Culture: Determining Knowledge-Sharing Attitudes

Abstract

The aim of the case study reported in this chapter was to provide a cultural audit of a university school as a typical knowledge-based organisation. The subjects were 24 academic staff members who participated in the study on a voluntary basis. The study found multiple cultures coexisting within the school. However, a fragmented type of culture, characterised by the lack of social interaction and commonly shared goals among academics, dominated. Contrary to popular belief within the knowledge management field, the study found that none of this diminished the school’s competitive position. These findings suggest that there may not be one generic type of culture that ensures organisational success in knowledge society. Rather, success may be contingent upon how well culture fits the business environment in which it competes.
Introduction

There is a widespread agreement that knowledge will become a major factor of organisational success or even survival in the new-age economy. It has been described as the principal fuel and the currency that will drive the economy (Devlin, 1999), a key resource of tomorrow’s organisations in the most competitive society we have yet known (Drucker, 1993), and a hidden gold embodied in the minds and hands of organisational participants (Stewart, 1997). In the new economy, companies will increasingly differentiate themselves on the basis of what they know, and how successful they are in making that knowledge productive. Knowledge management is an emergent response to the need to accelerate both the creation of knowledge and its application to physical resources in the battle for competitive advantage or survival. The central task of those concerned with knowledge management is to determine ways to better cultivate, nurture, and exploit knowledge at different levels and in different contexts. Arguably, knowledge management can create sustainable competitive advantage for organisations.

A global model of knowledge management (Arthur Andersen, 1998a) suggests four organisational initiatives—leadership, culture, technology, and measurement—as major enablers to facilitate knowledge management processes and foster the development of new knowledge. A recent literature review (Baxter & Chua, 1999) revealed western theorists’ central preoccupation with technology, particularly codified repositories and information processing, as enablers of “explicit” objective and systematic knowledge. On the other hand, eastern theorists seem to have realised that knowledge creation is highly dependent upon corporate culture. Their focus is on “tacit” knowledge that people derive from their experiences and through sharing (Nonaka, 1998; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). However, as we have repeated many times throughout this book, there is increasing recognition among western organisations that a large proportion of knowledge needed by their businesses is not captured (e.g., on hard drives and filing cabinets), but tacit (i.e., kept in the heads of people). Figures range anywhere between 40% and 90%, depending on the information source (Arthur Andersen, 1998b; Hewson, 1999).

It is argued that people’s behaviour and values contribute most to the circulation of tacit knowledge in organisations. Yet, little has been known of the ways in which tacit knowledge is actually shared, conditions under which this sharing occurs, or the impact it has on performance. Therefore, it is not surprising that there is a currently growing appreciation and interest in the issues of culture in knowledge management among researchers and practitioners alike. The main purpose of the current study is to provide some insights into values and behaviours that define a culture of a knowledge-intensive organisation. More specifically, the study will (1) conduct a cultural audit of a university school to identify its current organisational values, and
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