Chapter XI

Communities of Purpose: Eliminating Knowledge and Enhancing Practices in Transformational Government Programmes

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ABSTRACT

The integration of organizational knowledge across functional communities is increasingly seen as important. The frameworks to do so are often referred to as a ‘higher order set of principles’ or as ‘overarching architectures.’ While recognizing these frameworks as a source of competitive advantage, this chapter underlines the importance of linking organizational knowledge to practice. At the operational level, actual practices are rarely aligned with canonical practices contained in manuals, training programmes, and computer systems. In this theoretical chapter we show that the divergence between actual and canonical practices is exacerbated by a number of communities of practice addressing conflicting stakeholder interests. It is the link between knowledge and actual practice that is of central interest to this chapter. Exploring this relationship necessitates a reexamination of the role of communities of practice and frameworks for bringing together conflicting stakeholder interests. Drawing upon literatures from knowledge management, communities of practice, stakeholder, and resource-based theory this chapter suggests an integrative Purposive Community metaframework. The proposed conceptual framework contributes to the resource-based view of the firm by linking organizational knowledge to actual practices and enhancing organizational capabilities by integrating diverse stakeholder interests and expectations through a shared common goal. Such a metaframework can enhance an organisation’s dynamic capability to respond to and create change in its external environment.
INTRODUCTION

All transformational programmes face a common challenge: to identify the knowledge that should be retained and to eliminate the rest. The search for a solution to this challenge is not helped by the academic literature which makes the assumption that knowledge is generally useful. Identifying the knowledge to be retained is not as simple as it first appears. Knowledge is embedded in day-to-day activities, which are the practices and routines carried out by people and systems. Transformational programmes invariably affect practices and routines and consequently affect organisations’ stock and flow of knowledge. The relationship between knowledge and activities has received little direct research attention.

Knowledge to be eliminated is difficult to manage in transformational programmes. One way in which internal stakeholders can preserve their activities is by ensuring knowledge they create, control and use is left unchanged. Attempts to eliminate knowledge leads to resistance to change and creates barriers to the transformational programme. Knowledge exists within the structures of functional departments or divisions. Consider the major functions in any public sector organisation – finance, delivery, operations, human resources and customer services – each has its own knowledge base. Functions value the knowledge they create and use because the people, in the silos, know how their knowledge and their practices are conjoined. Yet in many large public sector organisations the practices and knowledge of one silo are barely understood by another. Elimination of knowledge becomes virtually impossible because no one knows the knock-on effects of removing knowledge from the organisation.

Divergent internal stakeholders’ interests result in tensions and disputes between people with formal and informal power. This causes dysfunctional behaviour in and between functions, which further exacerbates knowledge protectionism. The effects of differences in external stakeholders’ interests and expectations also lead to internal conflicts in activities. Often internal stakeholders compete to satisfy the interests of external stakeholders. For example, the finance function of a government department might emphasise the interests of its principle stakeholder, the Treasury that requires budgets to be reduced; whereas, the customer services or service delivery functions might focus on their key stakeholders, customers, who what higher levels of service that require bigger spending budgets. Consequently, functions are more inclined to compete than co-operate.

The problem of linking knowledge and practice is of central interest to this chapter. It extends the resource-based view of the firm by proposing a Community of Purpose (CP) meta-framework for linking knowledge and actual practices through a shared common goal. There are three parts to the meta-framework: the purpose is determined by the identification of a common shared goal; the community is a set of internal stakeholders who have common interests and influence actual practices; and dynamic capabilities that organisations need to develop to services to external stakeholders. A community is defined as the condition of having certain attitudes and interests in common. A Community of Purpose provides a ‘space’ that allows diverse interests of stakeholders and functional silos they influence to come together to achieve a common shared goal. Such a community can enhance organizational capabilities.

The objective of this chapter is to develop the Community of Practice meta-framework. In order to achieve this objective, this chapter draws upon and integrates literatures on knowledge management, communities of practice, stakeholder theory and resource-based theory. The chapter starts by laying the groundwork for a conceptual model of a Community of Purpose. It examines relevant perspectives on knowledge management in order to provide an understanding of the different types of knowledge, its dimensions and behavioural characteristics. Next, a discussion