Knowledge Management Processes

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INTRODUCTION

Knowledge management (KM), as a topic for academic research and practical implementation, has had a short history dating back only to the early 1990s. Due to knowledge management’s recent debut as we know it, it is not surprising that much of the writing and research on the subject is controversial. In this article we note the need of a critical awareness of desirable and undesirable shades of knowledge management processes (Land, Nolas, & Amjad, 2005).

BACKGROUND AND FOCUS

Knowledge is both disseminated and acquired. As observers we cannot know what intentions lay behind the act of dissemination, or what motivates the acquirer to acquire. We cannot blindly assume information—a major component of knowledge—as interpreted, facilitated, conceptualised, or experienced, is automatically for everyone’s benefit. The process of knowledge management may have a desired or detrimental outcome for society, an organisation, a team, or the individual. Indeed, the outcome of a KM activity, say knowledge sharing, is largely unpredictable. The reality is the outcome may benefit one group at the expense of another. Benefiting one group at the expense of the other is addressed by the following conceptual fusions.

KM is a continuum of desirable and undesirable political processes. This article suggests that the combined concepts of knowledge management, organisational politics (OP), and coevolution (CE) make a contribution to the understanding of KM, whether in its benign or its darker manifestation. Because knowledge management is a purposeful activity, it can never be neutral. Hence the article sets out to forewarn practitioners and thinkers in the area of KM that care must be taken since knowledge (K) can be manipulated for both altruistic and selfish purposes.

If the study of KM is to have an enduring future, it must take a more holistic stance. We suggest the concept of “coevolution” (McKelvey, 2002; Lewin & Volberda, 1999; Lewin et al., 1999) provides a way of understanding the implications of knowledge management on the organisation and its employees. Coevolution describes the mutual influences among actors in a collective, as well as their environment. Mutual influences can have desirable and undesirable, constructive and destructive effects. In the case of an organisation, coevolution can be envisaged as being effected in a set of multi-dimensional networks, themselves part of a larger set of networks to which they are linked.

Any event or activity will have some (possibly unknown) impact on other succeeding or collateral activities. Their responses will in turn trigger impacts and responses in further activities, including possibly in the activity that acted as the initial trigger. Each activity evolves on a trajectory which may have been planned, but the outcome and direction is often unexpected. The pattern of responses in diverse activities leads to their coevolution.

The coevolution of power and knowledge contribute to the discussion of the darker sides of knowledge management by offering an understanding of shades of desirable and undesirable forms of knowledge management. The concept of coevolution permits us to replace the simple ethical/non-ethical dichotomy and attempts to explain the dynamics in a continuum of knowledge management processes, actuated by motives, mediated by sources, and realised via the dissemination and acquisition of knowledge. Nevertheless, the complex pattern woven by coevolution remains uncertain, and permits the emergence of the unexpected.

KM occurs at all levels in the organisation. It may be a planned formal process supported by KM software designed to increase the effectiveness of a team of knowledge workers. Equally it may be a hidden process of knowledge manipulation by a group attempting to direct the organisation on a path away from its formal objectives. It may be an informal process, the reaction of a group of
people responding to an initiative they believe will damage them. But whatever the intention behind the process, both the study of organisational politics and coevolution suggest that the outcome will be uncertain. Outcomes, sometimes unexpected, emerge from the responses of organisational actors. In order to deal with the problem of uncertainty and emergence, at both an analytical and practical level, the article introduces the concepts of desirable and undesirable coevolution for looking at was is and not what ought to be.

CORE IDEAS OF THE ARTICLE

Knowledge, Power, and Their Dynamic Interactions

This article links together:

- Knowledge Management (KM)
- Organisational Politics (OP) and
- The concept of Coevolution (CE)

All three share a common concept: power. Knowledge management, despite much of the rhetoric surrounding the concept, is not a power-neutral process. If, as has been suggested (Land et al., 2005), knowledge is managed in order to achieve goals, be they benign or corrupt, political processes are invoked in the management process.

KM, OP, and CE all involve power, and each is profoundly affected by the way power is distributed. Knowledge management in its idealised form is independent of power. In reality the existence of an asymmetric power balance enables those with the power, often those who have formal authority, to present knowledge in directions of their choosing. Those with lesser power may respond by using knowledge to achieve their ends in more subtle and primarily informal ways, of which the spreading of rumours is one typical way. A central idea of KM is that knowledge, if considered a commodity, is manoeuvred toward shades of desirable and undesirable directions by multiple stakeholders.

OP, summarised as a wide range of descriptions of formal and informal power relationships in organisations, has been studied and documented at least since the 1970s (e.g., Pettigrew, 1973; Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1997). OP provides a theoretical lens with which to conceptualise and observe both constructive and destructive aspects of KM.

Most academic literature agrees KM is an essential activity for a modern enterprise to flourish in a global competitive economy, and many practicing managers share this view. Despite the slippery meaning of KM, a positive relationship between knowledge and truth—and hence KM—is implicitly assumed. An interpretivist view of KM is that people are capable of being aware of their own actions, further assuming knowledge and understanding are ‘good’ or at least neutral (Schultze, 1999). In other words, interpretivists take for granted people are self-aware, but optimistically believe knowledge management to be an inherently constructive and positive process. However, Schultze also notes that the open sharing of knowledge may not occur in competitive business environments associated with competitive advantage.

The inspiration for thinking about the interrelationship of knowledge management and power is found in the following concepts of coevolution and organisational politics.

Organisational Politics

The study of organisational politics suggests the driving force enabling organisational politics to occur is power, and in particular the asymmetrical distribution of power. Organisations are overlapping sets of political networks, rule, and role systems, engaging in coalition building as part of manipulative, selfish, under-the-table dealings, as well as for constructive purposes aimed at furthering the aims of that organisation.

The informal and formal organisation becomes part of the discussion, since it is the informal organisation where much of the political activity occurs—behind the scenes. Pfeffer (1997, p. 136), in support of this position, notes: “...these less formal methods rely more on power and influence, leverage individuals’ positions in social networks, and entail ongoing negotiations among organisational participants.” However, identifying political behavioural patterns for the sake of efficiency is not enough. “The skill is to try and prevent individual and organisational pathological circumstances from arising by recognising the appropriate and inappropriate behaviours that individuals and groups will and will not be able to accept” (Kakabadse & Parker, 1984, p. 101).

Three aspects of KM as a political process within an organisation are dependency, strategies for enacting power, and decision making.

Taking Pettigrew’s (1973, p. 26) position that “Power is...a property of social relationships, not an attribute of the actor...Dependency is...a product of an imbalance of exchange between individuals and the ability of one actor to control others through his [her] possession of resources,” knowledge can be a critical resource. Hence the desirable or undesirable directions of K manipulation can trigger that dependency to be constructive or destructive. For example, a senior manager may become dependent on the knowledge (experience) of a junior manager, therefore strengthening the expertise and performance of the team. The senior manager is dependent on the knowl-