Chapter VI
Sorting the Relationship of Tacit Knowledge to Story and Narrative Knowing

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ABSTRACT

This chapter fits the theme, the interplay between creativity and control in organizations. Story is often claimed to be a way to elicit tacit knowledge from people and their organization. The authors would like to suggest that this is impossibility. To story something is to shape it intuitively and willfully. Story shapes events into experience and into memory. Without story experience is just reenactment. To reenact is to relive the events, to feel the pain, fear, and terror.

INTRODUCTION

The concepts of knowledge management, and knowledge-intensive work have been developing for quite some time. In both theory and the vernacular of practice, knowledge and the knowledge worker are claimed to be the most important asset of contemporary organizations (Stewart, 1997). Knowledge workers as said to possess tacit knowledge, which various knowledge methodologies and specialized knowledge workers such as the “integrators, librarians, synthesizers, reporters, and editors” (Prusak, 1998, p. 110) convert to explicit knowledge when they “extract knowledge from those who have it, put it in a structured form, and maintain it or refine it over time” (Prusak, 1998, p. 110). Critics suggest that such knowledge solutions are perfunctory and propa-
gandist (Styhre & Sungren, 2005). Managerialist policies rely upon the manipulation of emotions and identity creation (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004). Managerialism is the view from the top, from the perspective of the managers (owners & executives – or others with power to wield). It is a top-down logic, a one logic that becomes the logic of change. There is a major difference between official organizational rhetoric and common everyday practice (Höpfl 1995; Argyris and Schön, 1996; Knights and Willmott, 1999).

Knowledge-intensive companies, such as in high-tech environments, purport knowledge-workers to be highly valued members of an organization. At the same time, critics suggest that these same workers are being manipulated and even “engineered” to engage in such performativity that they burn-out, and are deprived of family life (Perlow, 2004). Managers interested in leveraging worker knowledge by transferring it are faced with “the challenge of detaching knowledge from some people and attaching it to others” (Seely-Brown, 2000, 123). The spirit of this sort of language establishes a fundamental tension where the worker must give up a part of herself, ostensibly for the greater good, and the manager necessarily “mines” the worker until the mine is exhausted, no longer useful. The worker in this way becomes a depreciating asset, unless she can simultaneously conjure a new vein of knowledge. Manager and worker conflict is often more obvious than in less knowledge-intensive settings (Roscigno & Hodson, 2004). So too may be conflicts between workers who are likely to be better rewarded for possessing knowledge that constitutes competitive advantage than they are for sharing it.

We propose to study a different paradox that marks knowledge work in knowledge-intensive companies. The purpose of the present work is to look at the quest for tacit knowledge in knowledge management. Storytelling is often said to be a way to elicit tacit knowledge from knowledge workers (Prusak, 1998; Gherardi & Nicolini, 2003; Bukowitz & Williams, 1999; von Krogh, Ichijo, and Nonaka, 2000) and to foster the internalizing of explicit knowledge, converting it to tacit knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

In this study we will first provide a brief overview of Polanyi’s ideas about tacit knowledge and their implications. We will then establish the distinction between narrative and story, so that we can bring these ideas together to examine their interplay in the context of a small selection of popular, contemporary knowledge management and knowledge sharing theories and practices: Cooperrider’s Appreciative Inquiry, Denning’s Springboard stories and Wenger’s Communities of Practice.

Polanyi’s Theory of Tacit Knowing

Michael Polanyi’s concepts of tacit knowing and emergence are foundational to knowledge management theory, research, and practice. Michael Polanyi (1891-1976) was born in Budapest. Polanyi’s (1946) early work Science, Faith and Society, was followed in 1958 by Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy, a short book The Study of Man (1959), and in 1966 to a book that is the central topic of this essay, The Tacit Dimension (based on the 1962 Terry Lectures at Yale University). In this 1966 work, the seminal book for Polanyi’s work regarding tacit knowing and emergence, Polanyi argues against Existentialism, preferring to anchor his ideas in pragmatism. Polanyi (1966/1983) develops at least seven definitions and approaches to tacit knowing. Elsewhere Boje (2008a) has reviewed these in detail. We will summarize them briefly.

1. Neural Processes of Tacit Knowing - “Tacit knowing is the way in which we are aware of neural process in terms of perceived objects” (1966/1983: x). In the neural approach, tacit knowing is embodied in that “all thought dwells in its subsidiaries, as if they were
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