Chapter V

Knowing and Learning

This chapter discusses the concept knowing, which involves knowledge in action, and learning, which involves knowledge in motion. We look first at knowing and learning in the organization and then examine the tension between learning and doing. The discussion then turns to dynamic interaction between knowledge-enabled action and potential. The chapter concludes with five knowing and learning principles and includes exercises to stimulate critical thought, learning, and discussion.

Knowing and Learning

Knowing and learning are tightly interrelated knowledge-based activities. They are connected strongly by the knowledge-based activity doing. We introduce each concept separately but weave together many of their dynamic interrelations.

Knowing

Knowing refers to knowledge in action. This term is used often to differentiate knowledge-based action from the knowledge that enables it. Such differentia-
tion is referred to as epistemology of practice vs. epistemology of possession (Cook & Brown, 1999). The former manifests through what is done. Pragmatism (e.g., as articulated by Dewy) provides a philosophical basis for understanding epistemology of practice. Tacit knowledge practiced in group settings is privileged often in this former view. The latter manifests through what is known. Cartesianism (e.g., as articulated by Descartes) provides a philosophical basis for understanding epistemology of possession. Explicit knowledge possessed by individuals is privileged often in the latter view. Both views can obtain simultaneously and complementarily.

The classic example involves riding a bicycle (Polanyi, 1967). Through the action of riding a bicycle, a person demonstrates knowing how to do so. The knowledge associated with such riding can be tacit as well as explicit. For instance, an effective bicycle rider will certainly be able to balance on two wheels while moving and to turn by leaning into corners. However, if one asks such a rider in which direction he or she turns the handlebars when falling off balance, it is unlikely that the rider will be able to answer the question (see Cook & Brown, 1999, p. 384). Alternatively, if one asks such a rider in which direction he or she leans when turning through a corner, it is very likely that such rider will be able to answer the question.

In the former case of turning the handlebars, a rider is able to employ such knowledge effectively but unable to articulate it (the knowledge remains tacit). The rider knows how to balance but cannot explain the process to others. This phenomenon is common across a diversity of knowledge-based activities. It characterizes well the nature of tacit knowledge. In the latter case of leaning into a corner, the rider is able to both employ and articulate the enabling knowledge (the knowledge is made explicit). The rider knows how to turn and can explain the process (at least in part) to others. This phenomenon is also common across a diversity of knowledge-based activities. It characterizes well the nature of explicit knowledge.

In both cases, the rider is able to demonstrate knowing how to ride a bicycle, and the rider has knowledge of how to ride bicycles. In other words, when a person rides a bicycle, he or she knows how to do so. Such person retains knowledge of how to ride even when not riding actively. Thus, knowing and knowledge can both obtain simultaneously. Yet they are different: one involves manifest action, whereas the other involves potential for action. Knowing and knowledge are also complementary: the action of knowing cannot obtain without the enabling knowledge; and the enabling knowledge cannot be put to use except through the action of knowing.
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