Chapter IX

Avoiding Epistemological Myopia

Robert M. Mason
Florida State University, USA

Abstract

Organizational approaches to knowledge management are unlikely to lead to organizational wisdom unless the organization increases its awareness of factors that contribute to epistemological myopia—a nearsightedness that limits what and how the organization knows and how it learns. Contributors to this myopia include organizational learning pathologies, an unquestioning acceptance of fundamental concepts, such as time, and measuring success as the absence of failure. In many instances, the vocabulary, language, and business methods used by an organization, society, or culture reify these pathological factors and thereby further hamper the potential for learning. By raising our awareness of these contributors and the factors that support their reification and continued acceptance, we seek either to avoid these limitations or to develop corrective lenses that can extend the organization’s vision and enable it to resolve issues with greater clarity. The conceptual frameworks used in this chapter are drawn from four distinct areas of study: systems theory, organizational knowledge and learning, the organization as a learning community and community of practice, and linguistic relativity. The underlying theme is the organization as an
inquiring system—a system that seeks to learn and become more knowledgeable. Because learning processes are culturally biased, and the bias is reinforced by a culture’s values, language, and vocabulary, the premise is that these biases and values constrain the organization’s epistemological methods and processes. The potential solutions to epistemological myopia include deliberate nurturing of cultural diversity, the institutionalization of Singerian approaches to inquiry, and the fostering of managed risk in experiments that do not guarantee success. While few organizations exhibit all of these desirable characteristics, there are some examples from the literature and practice that provide confidence that organizations can avoid epistemological myopia.

Introduction

In examining organizations as learning systems, we acknowledge that considerable prior work (mostly from an economic perspective) has contributed to the increased attention given to organizational knowledge and learning. Much of this can be traced to the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm (Penrose, 1959) and from the more recent knowledge-based view (KBV) of the organization. The knowledge-based view of the firm, anticipated by Drucker (1988), may be viewed as a special case of the RBV with a focus on knowledge as an organizational resource (Grant, 1996a, 1996b). In this view, knowledge is seen as an increasingly important asset for firms, especially in technology-driven growth economies. Technology often is applied to add value to existing products and services and is the basis for creating new products and services. Survival in a technically and economically dynamic environment requires not only knowledge but also knowledge renewal. Learning—the continuing renewal of the knowledge asset—is necessary for competitiveness, and some have even argued that it is the only basis for sustained competitive advantage (Stata, 1989).

Because knowledge management and organizational learning are viewed as critical functions in many firms, information technology and information systems should be supportive of these functions. Consequently, the concept of knowledge management activities became popular both as a way for a firm to appropriate its own internal knowledge and for consulting firms to improve the efficiency of delivering services to their clients. Both approaches have been examined in cases and practice-oriented summaries (e.g., Davenport & Prusak, 1998). The information systems community has benefited from the research summaries of the foundations of organizational learning (Huber, 1991) and knowledge management (Alavi & Leidner, 2001).

This chapter acknowledges these economic and information technology motivated reviews of knowledge management and learning by organizations, but it is aimed toward the gap between the philosophical foundations of learning systems and the unstated assumptions that tend to guide knowledge management practice. Churchman (1971) provides the philosophical inspiration for our discussion about organizational epistemology with his view of organizations as inquiring systems. Beginning with the metaphor of sight as a medium for knowledge and knowing, we seek to illuminate issues that