Chapter III

Tacit Knowledge Defined

We have no idea how we do a lot of the things that we know how to do. Among those are the very fast feats of perception, recognition, attention, information retrieval, and motor control. We know how to see and smell, how to recognise a friend’s face, how to concentrate on a mark on the wall ... These definitely are tacit competencies. If there are rules involved, we have no idea what they might be (Dahlbom & Mathiassen, 1999, p. 33).

Introduction

As Dahlbom and Mathiassen (1999) state, even though we may not be able to articulate a lot of our “know how” as opposed to “know what” or “know that” (Garud, 1997), it is felt there is a proportion that can be. Within an organisational context, people make use of knowledge that is not necessarily codified or even articulated, this knowledge is said to be tacit, yet comprises not only a viable source of information to be articulated but provides an organisation with a competitive edge. The separation between articulable and inarticulable tacit knowledge has its foundations in the work of others. “… It is important to distinguish between tacit knowledge, which is embodied in skills and can therefore be copied, and tacit knowledge which cannot be demonstrated and so is very difficult to transfer (e.g., the recognition of a musical note)” (Senker, 1995a, p. 102). Although recognition is given to inarticulable tacit knowledge, or true tacit knowledge, the bulk of this monograph is concerned with the articulable component.

This chapter accomplishes two tasks. Part A provides the reader with a general background to knowledge with a view to where tacit knowledge fits into this spectrum. A broad review of the literature then is presented with tacit knowledge explored from different perspec-
tives. Exemplars will include the effect of culture on the importance of tacit knowledge to the competitive process, as well as the significance of the receiver understanding what it is they are being given in the form of knowledge. In addition, the role of metaphors and analogies in the tacit knowledge transfer process is explored. Part B explores definitions of tacit knowledge through a qualitative grounded theory approach. As a result of this process a working definition for the remainder of this book is established.

**Part A: The Knowledge Background**

Aside from postmodernist viewpoints with regard to definitions of knowledge (Kakabadse, Kakabadse, & Kouzmin, 2003), one can postulate that data is said to comprise pieces of unrelated code or facts (Busch & Dampney, 2000; Rowley, 2003), which become meaningful within a human mind when formed into information and thereto into knowledge (Hustad, 2004) for “there is evidence to suggest that a sliding scale exists between data, information and knowledge. Data consists of raw facts … Information is a collection of facts organised in such a way that they have [by virtue of what is implied in a human mind], additional value beyond the value of the facts themselves … Knowledge is the body of rules, guidelines, and procedures used to select, organise and manipulate data to make it suitable for a specific task ….” (Stair & Reynolds, 1998, 5 [italics added]). The Macquarie Dictionary defines value as “that property of a thing because of which it is esteemed, desirable, or useful, or the degree of this property possessed; worth, merit, or importance” (1997, p. 2337). Note the implied context that value is relative to human judgement, interpretation and assessment. Dahlbom and Mathiassen (1999) differ, as insofar as they see data being a representation of information, implying that information is a component of data. The key issue here is that data is a representation of a particular purpose viz: communication and in reality communication within an implied or explicit context. Thus, information is more than data—as there may be several possible contexts (aspects, perspectives) of the reality represented in the data. Data is thus a projection of information for a particular purpose, even if other purposes may also be supported. Information on the other hand requires interpretation and processing, leading inevitably to the requirement to articulate the means and skills, that is knowledge, supporting an interpretation. To summarise, and as Figure 1 illustrates, data is the minimum we are able to communicate, information elaborates but knowledge truly represents what we know both articulately and tacitly.

Knowledge is a manifestation of skills and means expressed by humans, making use of both data and information. Sveiby (1997) states that “knowledge cannot be described in words because it is mainly tacit … it is also dynamic and static,” furthermore, “information and knowledge should be seen as distinctly different. Information is entropic (chaotic); knowledge is nonentropic. The receiver of the information – not the sender – gives it meaning. Information as such is meaningless” (pp. 38, 49). Although it should be realised that data is the most basic representation of information and that organised information requires a component of knowledge, taking this reasoning one step further, one may envisage a knowledge hierarchy as illustrated in Figure 2. What begins as TK (Stage 1) (components of which may never be articulated), ultimately becomes separated from that which is able to be articulated (Stage 2), and eventually is so (Stage 3). In due course knowledge becomes categorised (Stage
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