Chapter 8

Tools for Talking: Conversations are Critical to Knowledge Management

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ABSTRACT

The simple act of conversing with colleagues and fellow members of communities of practice is a powerful vehicle for exchange of knowledge and for learning. Fostering opportunities for productive conversations is a strategy to consider seriously in enhancing knowledge transfer among individuals. Tools for enhancing the effectiveness of conversations—in person and virtually—are described in this chapter in the context of real life activities such as unconferences, mind mapping, and real-time collaboration and communication tools.

INTRODUCTION: CONVERSATIONS ARE CRITICAL AND CHANGE IS INEVITABLE

Knowledge management was previously defined as the collection, classification, and storage of information objects. This is information management, or KM 1.0, and not what many practitioners now consider to be KM. Explicit knowledge is addressed by the skills taught in information and archival science disciplines. The squishy part of KM - shared ideas and learnings - is harder to measure and quantify.

KM is about growing experiences and skills; understanding behaviours, attitudes and beliefs; and building relationships and trust.

In my experience, KM starts by simply opening a dialogue. It may lead to what Ulla de Stricker in the Context of Challenges chapter terms the “aha moment” of serendipitous discovery. In an article from The New York Times (Gray, 2013), the term “serendipity” is described as having been first “coined by the British aristocrat Horace Walpole in a 1754 letter, long referred to a fortunate accidental discovery. Today serendipity is regarded as a close kin to creativity - the mysterious means by which new ideas enter the world.”

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article discusses the influence of workplace environments to encourage opportunities for collaboration through impromptu meetings, informal discussions, and face-to-face connections.

My predisposition to KM is closely tied to intentional acts that initiate conversations as well as to methodologies and tools for fostering conversations to affect change. The outcome or goal of change is varied. For example, it might relate to expanding personal expertise and experience; improving workflows and processes for a group; and/or evolving the solutions for a community within a culturally acceptable and supported framework. Michael Sampson (2012) in *User Adoption Strategies* outlines the following six core concepts, bolded below, in his roadmap for change:

1. **Involve people in the change**: People are core in any initiative. Make sure the right people are “on the bus” with you and key stakeholders are involved.
2. **Deploy the right levers for change**: Understand the culture and articulate “what’s in it for them.”
3. **Make it about organizational improvement**: Align the change with your organization’s vision, mission, and goals; change for change’s sake will not work. Focus on a business result.
4. **Use repetition to make the proposed change real**: Practice, practice, practice! Figure out how to make shifts intuitive, or second nature. Do not over complicate a process.
5. **Encourage change rather than drive change**: Open a dialogue and make it interactive. Connect with people who are willing to model the change or, perhaps said another way, to pilot smarter ways to work.
6. **Give people time and space for change**: The process of change is not revolutionary. It is an evolutionary process that takes time. Listen and validate challenges but also stress benefits.

Throughout the change process, conversations are key. A conversation between two or more people allows participants to share expertise, learn others’ perspectives, and, at times, negotiate or balance goals. “Humans are ‘designed’ for dialogue [or conversations] rather than monologue” (Garrod & Pickering, 2004). Despite being unpredictable, conversations help us to think interactively together. Conversations offer opportunities for brainstorming ideas and developing solutions in an iterative and creative way that involves key people and stakeholders in the process.

The most difficult thing in writing about conversations is not being able to actually converse directly with you, the reader! There are many methodologies and tools to employ to foster conversations. The chapter below illustrates methods of engagement and technologies employed to foster conversations, share ideas and expertise, maximize opportunities for “collision” and creativity, and grow services and resources. So … let’s talk about how to proactively initiate conversations and change.

In the following, six conversation-fostering tools are described.

**TOOL 1: UNCONFERENCE**

**Overview: Participant-Driven Engagement**

Many free-form, energetic meeting (or un-meeting) formats such as Unconferences, Open Space Technology (OST), and Bar-Camps employ knowledge management methodologies. An unconference is a loosely facilitated, primarily participant-driven ses-