Chapter 10

Postscript: Leadership in Knowledge Management—The Authors’ Experience

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, four of the book’s contributors comment on their experience of leadership in the field of knowledge management. Due to the intrinsic nature of the discipline and due to the ways in which knowledge management manifests in organizations, leadership in KM requires a wide range of soft skills and considerable finesse.

ADVICE TO A NEW KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT LEADER

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The first piece of advice for a KM leader is to run away and find something else to lead! Why? Because providing leadership in any other internal functional area or any operational business unit will be less complex, will have fewer challenges and roadblocks, and will provide greater material reward and organizational recognition. In short, leading KM is the hardest leadership role within an organization—with the least traditional (status, remuneration, career advancement) return for all the required effort.

What explains it? In part it is because there is no roadmap for how to lead - and where to lead - an organization from a KM perspective. Yes, there are some broad frameworks and theories, but these are either wrong (the chapter on building smarter organizations critiques the popular Data-Information-Knowledge pyramid), too vague, or applicable only in certain circumstances. So a KM leader has to invent what he or she is doing - while doing it and while everyone is watching. It is a bit like being a chef preparing dinner, without recipes, in an open kitchen with hungry diners watching.

In addition, KM is more challenging than other organizational endeavors because it requires working with people from many different disciplines (e.g. business, information science, etc.)—people who are not accustomed to working in teams or working toward common goals. It requires creating a sense of community and collaboration among a diverse group of people. It requires working with people who are used to working independently and who may have different perspectives on how things should be done. It requires working with people who may be resistant to change and who may be resistant to adopting new technologies and methods. It requires working with people who may be used to working in hierarchical organizations and who may be resistant to working in a more flat, networked organization. It requires working with people who may be used to working in a more structured, linear organization and who may be resistant to working in a more flexible, agile organization.

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architecture, design, technology, content management, user experience, group dynamics) and across multiple internal functional areas (e.g. technology, training, human resources, risk/legal, business units) whose employees are more used to running an existing set of operations (e.g. the HR systems) than creating something that has never existed before.

The roadblocks come from the internal organizational politics that will assuredly rise up in front of an active KM leader. The politicking will come from functional areas trying to protect their turf (status, power, and budget); it will come from other leaders trying to score points off the newest - and therefore weakest - leader; and it will come as a result of business leaders using the KM leader as a pawn in their larger internecine battles (true of all internal functional leaders but easiest with KM since it is the most poorly defined). Most importantly, it will come from the organization itself reacting against you, like white blood cells rushing to defend the organizational body from your KM attack.

Why do they react that way? Because KM is fundamentally about transformational change: Even to think of knowledge as a key part of an organization’s success is to start to transform the organization and cause a reaction against it from those who are invested and embedded in the current modus operandi.

The second piece of advice is that you should become a KM leader ... if you enjoy helping advance your organization far more than is possible in any other functional area; if you delight in learning new things every day; if you want to have your leadership capabilities tested to their fullest; and if you want to meet - in your fellow KM leaders - some of the brightest and nicest people possible. It is some of the most fun you can have while being paid for it (although, likely, not particularly well paid).

Thirdly, KM leaders - those who have decided to continue in KM - need to devote themselves to study so that they can understand themselves (self knowledge), their organizations (organizational knowledge), and gain a vast range of insight from all sorts of different areas (subject matter knowledge). The reason for studying a KM leader’s organization should be obvious, as should the reasons for studying the virtually endless subjects a KM practitioner needs to understand. Some perhaps non-standard topics worth studying include neuroscience, political systems and politics, and approaches to marketing, branding, and sales.

Self knowledge is required because KM leadership requires strong conviction (given all the challenges arrayed against KM leaders) combined with self-doubt (because there is no obvious “one way” to follow). Any leadership role is lonely, but KM leadership is doubly so because the KM leaders are, as noted above, fundamentally working against the current organization (albeit to change it for the better). So a KM leader needs to understand himself or herself to be able to say “this is not hubris, it is the right thing to do” and to be able to know how to keep himself or herself whole and energized and not becoming bitter or exhausted by the struggle.

Fourthly, KM leaders need to understand that their role is to manage a variety of polarities. The classic KM polarity is the structure-unstructure polarity seen so often in the area of content management: Providing structure (obligatory metadata, restricted access, controlled formats) can have great value to the organization (efficiency in information, reuse of knowledge) but tends over time to become overdone. Such “over-structuring” leads to resentment by content contributors of the restrictions placed on them, the consequent slowing of content contribution, and the clogging of