STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING ORGANIZATIONAL ANXIETY WITH KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The concept of effective Knowledge Management (KM) strategies for managing organizational anxiety is the focus of this paper. In the past, KM has been thought of as the collection of technological assets and managerial policies that compensate for information failures. Recent studies have uncovered the popularity of KM research since most large organizations have lost the potential for personal information sharing to take place.

Our work begins with the evolution of KM and many of its common practices. We continue by discussing the role of KM in managing anxiety among organizational leaders. In particular, we use the example of anxieties among leaders in colleges and universities and incorporate KM solutions with suggestions to break the destructive cycle.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of Knowledge Management (KM) has been around for decades, but most organizations accept it only as theory and have not put it into practice. It has been difficult for many firms to evolve their organizational thinking from an information focus to a knowledge focus. Throughout the past several decades, information systems practices were sufficiently developed to accomplish efficient information production. Problems arose when information was in abundance, but key individuals possessing pertinent knowledge did not or would not share it with others who stand to benefit from its discovery.

The Gartner Group, an international technology consulting group, defines KM and offers it as a discipline that encourages a mutually supported method to create, capture, organize, and use information (Duffy, 2000). From a more intuitive standpoint, it is using whatever means possible to compensate for the fact that most organizations are too big for everyone to know each other and share information at a person-to-person level (Novins, 2000). Therefore, necessary incentives must be put into place in order for KM to be viewed by firms as an asset that goes beyond the value of their available information.

In our work, we focus on the role of effective KM in the age of anxiety. In particular, many organizations are susceptible to a form of self-destruction caused by the pervasiveness of employees' anxieties. We examine this phenomenon in college and university settings and propose KM strategies that may be integrated into suggestions for reducing organizational anxiety.

REVIEW OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Dunn and Neumeister (2002) provide a synopsis of the evolution of KM. They postulate that instances of KM may have first been recognized around the time of World War II. It was during this time that it became evident how workers learned from experience. For instance, it was noticed that building a second airplane took considerably less time that building the first. Nobel Prize-winning economist Kenneth Arrow (1962) addressed the issue of learned experience (i.e. KM) in his article entitled "The Economic Implications of Learning by Doing." It was during this same time period that resources began to be devoted to the cause of determining significant performance variations in output within organizations.

Attempts to increase organizational learning in the 1970s and 1980s included Information Management and Total Quality Management. Another practice called the Human Capital Movement also arose during this time frame and is based on the belief that investment in individuals through education and training has a high rate of return. Although it is unclear when the term "Knowledge Management" was officially coined, its concept intensified in the 1990s. Karl Wiig (1993) authored "Knowledge Management Foundations: Thinking about Thinking – How People and Organizations Create, Represent and Use Knowledge" which was possibly the first published use of the term.

Koskinen's (2004) work categorizes KM into two components to support communication and implementation in management. First, he defines *explicit knowledge* as knowledge that can be embodied in a code or a language, and, as a consequence, can be communicated easily. The code may be words, numbers, or symbols like grammatical statements, mathematical expressions, specifications, manuals, and so forth. In addition, he defines *tacit knowledge* as knowledge based on the experience of individuals. It expresses itself as human actions in the form of evaluations, attitudes, points of view, commitments, motivation, etc. Some have summarized tacit knowledge by the phrase, "We know more than we can tell." To distinguish between the two, explicit knowledge is about *why* things work, and tacit knowledge is about *what* things work.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT CHARACTERISTICS AND ROLES

In an e-Business presentation, Novins (2002), a vice president at Cap Gemini Ernst & Young, summarized the characteristics of KM. His remarks were that good KM should have three characteristics. They are:

1. KM needs to address a real business problem that everybody agrees is a problem.
2. An organization cannot sustain a KM system without some kind of community interest or practice that provides content and accepts responsibility for continuing to build and share that content.
3. KM systems have to make it very easy for people to get the content they need.

In addition, O'Dell (2004) describes the three roles of a KM system. These roles are identified and defined as:

Knowledge Steward: One who collects, analyzes and organizes knowledge held by individuals within an organization.

Knowledge Facilitator: One who establishes connections between individuals in order to share knowledge.

Community of Practice Leader: One who sets the direction and climate for knowledge sharing in the community and ensures that the organization and the members are all benefiting from the exchange.

To successfully apply these characteristics and roles, it is important for organizations to realize that KM will not happen without sufficient resources. Such resources should be dedicated to the task of making information sharing possible.

THE AGE OF ANXIETY

If we think about organizational leaders in the midst of today's economy, certainly the term "stress" comes to mind. There are uncertainties in every organization, but uncertainty seems to be at an all-time high. If nothing else, organizations are kept off-balance with the threats of cut-backs, layoffs, and creative solutions to budgetary problems. The goal of managing organizational anxiety cannot be ignored. When employees feel chronic anxiety, they will operate on emotions rather than principles. They lose the ability to think clearly and rationally. (Miller, 2008). It is true that some anxiety is normal and possibly desirable because it is a natural response to ensure one's survival. It is also true that anxiety is contagious, spreading through organizations like wildfire and causing a chain reaction of emotional unrest. While emotions flare, real issues are rarely addressed.

ANXIETY IN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Certainly, this premise could be applied to organizations or institutions of all types. We choose to focus on the dynamics of organizational anxiety in colleges and universities. The continuous drive for improvement and accountability in education makes it a prime example of the need for knowledge repositories. Government funding for education at all levels is tightening while there is increased pressure for improvement and assessment of student outcomes (Miller, 2002; Ewell, 2002). Colleges and universities, as well as primary and secondary schools are being called to a higher level of accountability in terms of the mission and needs of students. These increasing demands lead to unnatural levels of stress and anxiety. Solutions to anxiety issues in colleges and universities often lie in the inability of leaders to overcome knowledge barriers.

Educational institutions frequently employ an information architecture that is disjointed and counterproductive, not unlike the business environment (Petrides and Guiney, 2002). Combined with the above barriers are the issues of asynchronous "technology culture" and "information culture." Many colleges, universities and schools are pouring millions of dollars into information technology without considering how to effectively integrate those technologies into shared decision-making processes to improve academics, operation and planning.

ACCREDITATION AND THE IMPACT OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

There are several different accrediting organizations in the U.S., and universities and colleges may be accredited by just one or by a few different organizations. For example, two accrediting organizations affiliated with the authors' university are the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). Justification for the attainment of accreditation standards is a knowledge intensive process. Not only are assessments made on curricula and attainment of educational objectives, but qualifying criteria must be met by faculty as well. Since accreditation (or reaffirmation of accreditation) examines colleges and university over a window of time, there must a mechanism in place to capture pertinent information and transform it into a knowledge-rich repository.

KM ACCREDITATION TOOLS TO BREAK THE ANXIETY CYCLE

Continuing with the phenomenon of organizational anxiety, solutions to this problem have been discussed in recent literature (Miller, 2008). They include the following:

1. Strive to be a predictable leader.
2. Map the anxiety in your situation.
3. Learn to take an "I-position."
4. Calm yourself with a six-second vacation.
5. "De-triangle" yourself.
6. Correct and overfunctioning/underfunctioning relationship.

In studying the above-mentioned solutions for diminishing organizational anxiety, two of these solutions have the potential to be executed through effective knowledge management. We further examine the goals of 1) striving to be a predictable leader and 2) correcting overfunctioning/underfunctioning relationships. An example of the integration of anxiety reducing strategies with knowledge management tools is the case of the processes for accreditation of colleges and universities.

A common problem in preparation for an accreditation team is providing insightful knowledge concerning a university's mission, goals, and objectives. This is by nature a knowledge intensive process. The burden is usually put upon administration to produce reports which validate that accreditation standards have been met. It is very easy for those in leadership positions to jump from rational system standards to emotional behavior when they are put under pressure. Thus, a leader's management style becomes unpredictable. A structured methodology is needed for the attainment of knowledge. Knowledge should be extracted in a consistent manner across all departments involved. In addition, the knowledge gathering tools should keep certain individuals from entering an overfuntioning mode while others are content to sit back and carry little or none of their fair share of the burden.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Having gained insight into the study of KM and its inverse relationship with the amount of anxieties found in organization, our work provides a theoretical foundation for the development of future strategies. We hope to continue to examine tools and methodologies to easily extract knowledge in colleges and universities. We will also further explore the issue of organizational anxieties and suggest further strategies for its reduction. Our quest is still found in that which was stated by Novins (2002), "The solution isn't creating the world's greatest database repository of all wisdom with the world's fanciest search engine. Instead, we need to give people specific tools designed to help them do their job and solve specific business problems." Hopefully, those in higher education will be enlightened to see that they possess the knowledge to create situations that enhance not only their own performance, but the performance of their colleagues and the productivity of the institution as a whole.

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