

Introduction

Welcome to my April newsletter, in which I provide tips on how to contribute to a collaborative workplace by improving how you share information and knowledge.

The idea for this month's email arises from (1) client discussions on communication, and (2) questions asked in recent Knowledge Management presentations I made, on behalf of the actKM community, at recent CPA Symposiums.

Specifically, the issues were about:

- * On ourselves – How do we personally improve how we share information and knowledge?
- * On others – How do you make people share knowledge?

How Can I Improve My Information and Knowledge Sharing Abilities?

We sometimes comment on how poor some organisations or managers are in sharing information with us, yet let's turn the mirror on ourselves: How well do we share information with others? Do we wait to be told? How proactive are we? Here are some things you can do:

- * Do a self check, or ask others to give you feedback: how well do you contribute information
- * Observe role models: what do they do, how do they do it
- * Know that by sharing your knowledge you're not giving it away – you still have it
- * Know that sharing knowledge is a competency increasingly rewarded and expected in organisations
- * Practise: pick a moment each week, and share something you know
- * Speak up in meetings: be prepared; asked to be put on the agenda
- * Let people know what you do, and encourage them to ask you for information when they need it
- * Observe how you share: is it effective? On-line? Face-to-face
- * Observe the quality of your information (over quantity)
- * Build your knowledge sharing into everyday activities such as project meetings, team meetings, phone calls
- * Write an article for an internal or external journal or newsletter
- * Persist in the face of organisational barriers
- * Practise storytelling – it can be more enjoyable and interesting
- * If documenting on-line, keep it brief, use bullet points and keywords
- * Find a friend who is also on this mission – support each other

How Can An Organisation Encourage Better Sharing?

How do you MAKE people share what they know? You can't. However, you can influence the environment that supports people to share willingly. Here are just some tips and ideas (beware, there are no single clear solutions):

- * Know about people, and what influences their communication abilities (their values, upbringing, environment, mindset, habits, experience, desire, willingness, having time, security, trust, fear that knowledge shared will be misused)
- * Provide incentives to share, rewards, recognition
- * Minimise competitive behaviours that reinforce knowledge hoarding
- * Encourage communities of practice
- * Ask members of staff to make presentations at meetings or training courses
- * Establish a mentoring programme
- * Encourage people to join different teams, take on different roles so as to interact with other people
- * Encourage storytelling and sharing of anecdotes in all sorts of forums
- * Support the watercooler effect e.g. coffee breaks, open plan gatherings
- * Provide an office environment that supports communication
- * In project meetings and team environments, draw information out of people by engaging them in discussion
- * Build time into projects to allow for debriefs, make it part of the job, not an add-on

- * Encourage curiosity – let people know it's good that they ask questions
- * Ensure at least one person on each team naturally shares knowledge
- * Encourage informal communication channels, allow them to happen
- * When working with experts, acknowledge their 'expertness'; note that it is usually difficult for them to explain their expertise to others: a way to capture this can be by in-depth one-on-one interviews, and shadowing/mentoring
- * Ask staff to write for external or internal publications – this boosts their status and esteem, and captures some knowledge

Consider also some Change Management issues such as:

- * Start at the top, speak with one voice, and model the desired behaviours
- * Use champions
- * Clearly articulate the benefits and vision
- * Understand that some people will resist change
- * Employees will support what they helped to create: involve them in the culture change planning

Quotes

"Information is a source of power, and a lack of information disempowers" (John Kotter - The Heart of Change, 2002).

"There is a powerful emotion associated with being asked for one's opinion" (VisionCor White Paper - The Human Element: Knowledge Management's Secret Ingredient - 2001)

"Knowledge can only be volunteered, it cannot be conscripted (Dave Snowden - Complex Acts of Knowing: Paradox and Descriptive Self-Awareness - Journal of Knowledge Management, May 2002)

"There is a growing recognition that sharing knowledge is essentially a social activity, that knowledge has a social life and so operates beyond the formal organisational structures – in networks, communities and affinity groups" (Victoria Ward & Kim Sbarcea – Storytelling is Knowledge Management – 2001)

References

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Davenport, TH, Thomas, RJ, Cantrell, S: The Mysterious Art and Science of Knowledge-Worker Performance, MIT Sloan Management Review, Fall 2002

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Turner, Rebecca: The Water Cooler Effect, AFR Boss Magazine, Feb 2002

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About This Article

My aim is to provide you with information to assist you at work, with your own development, and in developing your staff. The theme for 2004 is 'Building Collaborative Workplaces'. Each month I concentrate on an area based on topics raised by my clients. Material is drawn from journals, books, articles and shared experiences.

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