

Knowledge in Brief

Three Reflections on Meeting Face to Face

E-mail and virtual workspaces are important contributors to knowledge exchange in large, dispersed organizations, but face-to-face conversation adds essential depth and richness to collaboration, knowledge sharing, and trust creation. Here are three brief examples of how these conversations can be encouraged.

Gathering Under the Marula Tree (Courtesy of Rob Weare)

Namdeb Diamond Corporation of Namibia supports the creation of a knowledge-sharing culture by engaging in culturally based activities that encourage the flow of experiential knowledge and the development of cooperative relationships.

At Namdeb, the operational senior management team conducts a monthly knowledge-sharing café with all managers. They call their meeting an “Omugongo.” Commonly known as the Marula, the Omugongo tree plays a central role in the community. Thanks to its thick foliage and cool shade, it has long served as the location for important community gatherings, where important issues are fully and openly discussed.

By choosing the name Omugongo for this management community gathering at Namdeb, and by insisting that the meetings be conducted in keeping with the deep cultural traditions surrounding this tree, the senior management team ensures that conversation will be rich

and candid. Relevant strategic objectives and initiatives are shared, and an open and free exchange of ideas is encouraged. The lively and open discussion helps create valuable trust relationships that encourage further knowledge exchange and collaboration.

Japanese Talk Rooms

Many Japanese pharmaceutical firms have “talk rooms.” These are attractive lounges where tea is served all day and researchers sit down and discuss their projects with fellow scientists in an informal, relaxed setting. People speak to different people every day, most of them strangers to each other’s research. The rooms facilitate knowledge exchange and invite serendipitous creative blending of ideas at very low costs.

These pharmaceutical firms have also taken to displaying posters outside their laboratory doors that tell passers-by what the scientists are working on. This is meant to encourage any and all to stop by and chat about the work, a technique that costs nothing and can have a great pay-off.

The Wired Coffee Pot

Believing strongly in the creative value of chance conversations, managers of Xerox’s Palo Alto Research Center devised a way to enhance the already powerful drawing power of free coffee. They connected the center’s coffee pot



to the center’s computer network so researchers would get a message on their desktops whenever a fresh pot had been brewed. That electronic announcement usually brought several of them to the coffee lounge, where they often stayed to chat about their work.

Managers put white boards around the lounge so researchers could jot down ideas and calculations. A camera automatically captured these sometimes-valuable notes and sketches, and the images were made available on the center’s intranet, inviting others to comment and contribute. ●