

The Knowledge Notebook

Leadership and Knowledge

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I almost hesitate to write this column because I devoutly believe that too much is made of “leadership” in business curriculum and in the popular press. Organizational life in general and the activities involved in actually getting things done are profoundly social, never the work of one man or woman. Having said that, I recognize that we still mainly organize ourselves with hierarchical structures, archaic as they may seem. Given this fact, it does matter what the “leader” does or says. Organizational structures and the roles of leaders differ quite a bit from organization to organization, but it seems that leaders will have considerable power and influence for some time, though probably less than they think.

So what can a “leader” actually do to advance the cause of knowledge in an organization? Very few people would actually speak out against knowledge—though I have met one or two who have done just that—but benign neglect will not help organizations use knowledge more effectively and efficiently and develop and value new knowledge. Here are some things leaders can and should do.

One essential action is to talk about knowledge, making the case for the importance of knowledge to the organization with passionate conviction. Good ideas do not—I repeat, do not—succeed because of their internal logic or their obvious merit. They succeed because people fight for them, using their passion, their understanding, their political skill and guile, and their rhetorical powers to make the case for ideas they believe in. This involves finding cases and stories of how knowledge adds value. We all have seen this happen in varied circumstances and know how well it works when it is done well. One

way any of us can help in this regard is to feed these cases to our leaders. It may seem a small thing to do, but it can be tremendously effective in helping leaders lead and advance the knowledge cause.

Another important leadership role is to use symbols and signals to show employees the value placed on knowledge. Symbols can be anything from awards for innovative uses of knowledge—BP used to give an award for what they called the “best stolen” idea—to encouraging employees to read and write, attend relevant meetings, subscribe to journals, and bring in guest speakers. In addition to the value of the activity, all these things convey a message, signaling the importance of the subject and showing that management values it enough to spend some funds on its behalf.

Probably the strongest signal about what an organization values and believes is sent by who gets promoted. Considerable research has been done on the power of promotion as a communication device. A promotion in essence says, “This person exemplifies the values we hold dear.” Even if successful employees’ vocational or educational histories are not relevant to you, you are likely to be aware of what sort of people they are, what values they represent, and how they advanced. If you don’t know these things from direct observation, you will learn about them soon through the organizational grapevine that quickly spreads such news.

Let me give you an example. I have worked for five major management consulting operations in my too-long working life. All these firms claimed they were committed to developing new knowledge. They stressed this claim in their advertising and made it a central, vigorous part of their attempts to win and hold new clients. All

but one of them, however, based promotions *only* on how many engagements individual consultants sold. Knowledge creation by consultants was never recognized or rewarded. Needless to say, this mismatch between words and deeds engendered cynicism in the staff about the importance of knowledge-development activities. If only sales were valued, one had better sell if one wanted to succeed.

Now, I am not against promoting sales, but the result of telling one and all how much they valued knowledge and then not valuing it at all in action was that those firms seldom developed or transferred valuable knowledge. It is interesting to note that the only one of the five firms that exists and thrives today is the one that genuinely promoted knowledge activities.

The other very important thing leaders can do is lead by example. Our new president offers a case in point. What better way to promote literacy and clear thinking among our kids than to have a president—the ultimate leader—who has actually written two literate and clear-headed books.

When I read about a CEO or senior manager who genuinely encourages knowledge activities, the story stays in my memory mainly because it is so rare an event. A day may come when it is more common. Until then, I urge leaders who may be reading this to realize above all that your employees and peers watch both what you say and what you do and tend to adjust their own behavior accordingly. So talk about the value of knowledge but, above all else, show how much knowledge matters through your deeds and decisions. ●

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