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Developing a Dilemma Model to Diagnose and Overcome Organizational Cultural Barriers to Implement Knowledge Management

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'Knowledge' and 'Culture': Organisational Intangibles and their Tangible Value
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Abstract

Knowledge Management has recently been recognised as a basis of competitive advantage by many organizations around the world. However the rate of success of projects to implement knowledge management has been disappointing based on surveys conducted over the past five years. One of the major reasons for the failures has been identified as the barriers due to organizational culture. Research conducted in identifying cultural blocks to knowledge management using conventional research methods such as surveys has not provided very satisfactory insights.

Professor Charles Hampden-Turner and Dr. Fons Trompenaars have successfully used ‘dilemma theory’ to identify dimensions of organizational culture for many years. Their research has helped managers to build cross-cultural competence in organizations in spite of conflicting values to implement successful business strategies. They have recently determined some dimensions of organizational culture, based on dilemmas that can inhibit the implementation of knowledge management in organizations. If a model capable of identifying these dimensions based on dilemmas faced by managers can be developed it would benefit knowledge management practitioners and managers to successfully implement knowledge management projects.

Keywords: Organizational Culture, Knowledge Management, Cultural Dilemmas

Introduction

Executives, consultants and management scholars have pointed out the importance of knowledge as a source of competitive advantage in recent years. (DeLong and Fahey 2000, Dyer 2000, Brown and Duguid 1998, Leonard-Barton 1995, Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995, Davenport and Prusak 1998, Teece 1998).

However efforts by many companies to manage knowledge have not been successful. One of the key reasons for the failure of such implementation has been the barriers that were faced by managers due to organizational culture. (DeLong and Fahey 2000, McDermott and O’Dell 2001, Davenport and Prusak 1998, Chase 1997).

Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (1998) have been studying national and organizational cultures since 1985 in an organizational environment using the ‘dilemma theory’. Their method is based on asking specific questions in the form of dilemmas and analysing the responses in terms of cultural dimensions. Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, quoting prominent sociologist Schein, whose ideas have been used by many researchers studying

organizational culture, state that ‘Culture is the way in which a group of people solve problems and reconcile dilemmas’ (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998: 6). Another important aspect of the dilemma model is that both Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (Hampden-Turner 1994, Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 2000) have used them in organizations to reconcile cultural differences to build strategies. Therefore the dilemma model seems a viable model to research into knowledge management due to its proven link with organizational strategies.

Organizational Culture

Schein (1992: 12) defines *organizational culture* “as a pattern of basic assumptions that the group has learned as it solved problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to these problems”. Schein (1992: 16-17) also points out that organizational culture can be analysed at three levels:

1. artefacts – structures and processes



2. espoused values – strategies, goals and philosophies
3. basic underlying assumptions – unconscious taken for granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts and feelings (that become the source of values and action)

A MODEL OF CULTURE

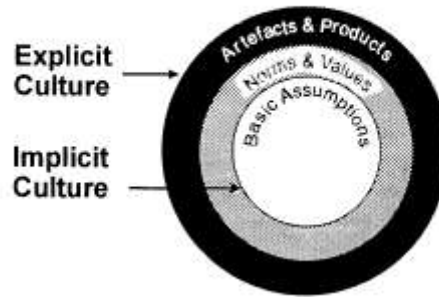


Figure 1
Schein's Model

Choo (1998) points out that many organizations do not enjoy the level of integration and consistency prescribed by Schein and quoting Martin (1992) proposes that multiple perspectives are needed to look at organizational culture based on integration, differentiation and fragmentation. Integration is defined by organizational members showing a high level of consensus, consistency and clarity similar to what Schein has proposed. In differentiated organizations subcultures dominate and consensus exists only at local levels, inconsistency is common and clarity is mainly found within subcultures. Fragmentation sees organizations as webs of individuals who are loosely connected where consensus is temporary limited to specific issues, consistency is unclear and ambiguity remains.

Handy (1995) classifies organizational culture as power culture (dependant on a central power source), role culture (bureaucratic), task culture (small team, flexible, adaptable) and person culture (individual, professional practice). Moreover each culture originates from assumptions made about power and influence, motivation, how people think and learn and how changes can happen.

Morgan (1997) describes culture as shared meaning, understanding and sense-making. Kettinger and Grover (1995) state that an organization's culture influences its ability to learn, share information and to make decisions.

From a brief review of prominent scholars it appears that organizational culture can be studied by looking at what an organization is – its structures, what it stands for – espoused values, where power resides, forms of consensus, consistency and clarity and what it does by observing how an organization acts – takes decisions, learns, shares information. There is also an external and internal dimension to organizational culture.

Some scholars who study national cultures like Hofstede, Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars present another school of thought to describe organizational cultures in terms of cultural dimensions.

Hofstede (1991), who considers culture as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from another, suggests six dimensions of practice for organizational culture:

1. process-orientated versus results-orientated;
2. job-orientated versus employee-orientated;
3. professional versus parochial;
4. open systems versus closed systems;
5. tightly versus loosely controlled; and
6. pragmatic versus normative.

In a seminar given at Oxford, Trompenaars (Onepine 2003) defined culture as the unique whole, the heart and soul, that determines how a group of people will behave. Cultures are collective beliefs that in turn shape behaviour. They can include cognitive frameworks, shared meanings and perceptions, behavioural codes, values, stories, heroes and heroines, symbols and rituals. Trompenaars and Woolliams (2003) classify the extreme types of stereotypes in terms of corporate culture as:

1. The *incubator*, which is a person-oriented culture with low centralisation and formalisation; an organization that exists to serve the needs of its members.
2. *Family* culture, characterised by a high degree of centralisation and low degree of formalisation; an organization that is predominantly power oriented.

3. *Guided missile* that has a low degree of centralisation and high degree of formalisation; typically task or project oriented.
4. *Eiffel Tower* characterised by high degree of formalisation and high degree of centralisation, stately and robust.

There are some similarities between these classifications and the ones proposed by Handy (1995) referred to earlier.

Knowledge Management and Organizational Culture

The Journal of Knowledge Management conducted an international survey with the assistance of the Best Practice Club™ and The Benchmarking Exchange in 1997 to look into various aspects of knowledge management. Chase (1997:46) conclude from this survey that 'organizational culture was seen as the biggest obstacle to creating a knowledge-based organization' as reported by 80% of the respondents to the survey. It was also observed that culture could hinder the introduction of knowledge management programs actively or passively. De Long and Fahey (2000: 113) have reported that their research, in more than 50 companies pursuing knowledge management projects, revealed that 'organizational culture is widely held to be the major barrier to creating and leveraging knowledge assets'. McDermott and O'Dell (2001: 77) probed 40 companies who shared knowledge effectively to understand the impact of culture with success in knowledge management projects. During interviews held with these 40 companies they observed that 'culture plays an important role in the success of a knowledge management effort'.

Moffett et.al. (2002) developed a model for technology and cultural factors in knowledge management called the MeCTIP model, and observed through a survey, that very few respondent organizations adopted a culturally led change program for knowledge management. However, current literature strongly suggested that organizations achieving the best results from KM, are those that combined a culture/technology approach (Davenport and Prusak 1998)

Janz and Prasarnphanich (2003) studied the impact of the influence of organizational climate on knowledge activities (specifically cooperative learning) and concluded that (p371) 'effort spent in creating a knowledge-centred culture will be rewarded with higher levels of knowledge-related activities like cooperation and learning'.

Strategies involving knowledge transfer should suit the style and context of the organization (Skyrme 2000). Extensive knowledge transfer could not happen in large global companies without the

tools provided by information technology. However, the values, norms, and behaviours that make up a company's culture are the principal determinant of how successfully important knowledge is transferred (Davenport and Prusak 1998). Senge (1990) echoes Davenport's sentiments, concluding that the adoption and application of new knowledge can be a slow and arduous process, and the success rate will be profoundly influenced by the culture of the firm. Based on her two year study of knowledge transfer in five organisations, Dixon (2000) states that it is not necessary to create a learning culture first before knowledge sharing can occur. She states that the sharing of ideas about issues that are important can help create a learning culture. She (Dixon 2000:4) argues that 'Given many organization's rather abysmal success rate at changing their culture, I would put money on having the exchange impact the culture rather than waiting for the culture to change'. Dixon's views point to a dynamic relationship between knowledge sharing and culture change.

From this brief review we can conclude that culture can be both a barrier and a catalyst to successful knowledge management implementation. Therefore an understanding of the relationship of organizational culture with knowledge management activities such as knowledge sharing and dissemination will be very beneficial to practitioners and managers in understanding how knowledge management initiatives can be successful.

Methodologies Used

Chauvel and Despres (2002) have analysed a variety of surveys conducted in knowledge management, and have pointed out that 'differences on organizational culture have seldom been addressed' in these surveys, although two of the surveys reported in their paper were specifically aimed at knowledge culture. Interviews seem to have been more useful in examining knowledge cultures (DeLong and Fahey 2000, McDermott and O'Dell 2001).

A survey of the literature shows that most research studies conducted to investigate the relationship between knowledge management and organizational culture have primarily used surveys, interviews or case study approaches (Moffett et. al 2002, Janz and Prasarnphanich 2003, Chourides, Longbottom and Murphy 2003, Ford and Chan 2003).

An action research study is being planned by Micahilova and Husted (2002) looking at four levels of culture – professional subcultures, organizational culture, cultures in inter-organizational networks and national cultures to investigate the nature of the relationship between knowledge management culture. The study expects to combine qualitative and quantitative methods.

However, no research study into knowledge management using a dilemma approach could be

found in the literature review. The authors of this paper feel that using a dilemma approach to study the impact of organizational culture could be a useful contribution to research in this area.

All four authors have themselves experienced dilemmas faced by their own organizations to implement knowledge management, and feel that using dilemmas would be a practical approach to investigating cultural barriers to implementing knowledge management in organizations. While national cultures can also impact knowledge management, this study will focus mainly on organizational culture.

Using Dilemmas to Study the Impact of Organizational Culture

Professor Hampden-Turner and Dr. Trompenaars (1998) have successfully used 'dilemma theory' to identify dimensions of national and organizational culture for many years.

In a book titled 'Building Cross-Cultural Competence' Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000) have emphasised the need for cross-cultural competency as an essential skill for all managers to create wealth for their organizations. The book provides insight into how managers can use dilemmas for business advantage by integrating rather than polarising values to make better decisions.

Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000: 348) have also described 'dilemma theory' that has been used in their research. From a description of their 'dilemma theory' following features have direct implication on knowledge management:

1. Many of the tensions within living systems have been found in organizational behaviour. Industries and workplaces confront dilemmas that they must resolve to generate wealth.
2. Searching into and resolving dilemmas is a form of human and organizational learning
3. It requires creativity and innovation

If we adopt the view that knowledge provides the basis for creating competitive advantage that leads to greater profitability, sharing knowledge creates better decision-making, personal and organizational learning are aspects of a knowledge-enabled organization, and creativity and innovation contribute to a knowledge culture, we can clearly see a role for using dilemmas to enhance the implementation of knowledge management in organizations.

Professor Trompenaars has himself indicated in a recent interview (Lelic 2003) for the *kmmagazine* that 'knowledge management is, or should be, fundamentally a cultural issue'. He also expressed an opinion that 'effective knowledge management is

dependent on the type of organizational culture in which it reconciles dilemmas'. Five central dilemmas have been identified by Trompenaars that are the key to the successes of knowledge management initiatives:

1. Universal vs Particular
2. Individual vs Team
3. Specific and Codified vs Diffuse and Implicit Knowledge
4. Internal Control vs External Control
5. Perceptions from the Top-Down and Bottom-Up

Proposed Methodology

The purpose of our research is to build a tool for practicing managers using dilemmas to identify cultural barriers in implementing knowledge management.

The methodology to create such a tool will use the following steps:

1. An initial survey will be conducted among managers who have studied knowledge management as an MBA Unit, and practicing managers who are pursuing postgraduate research into knowledge management at Southern Cross University, to collect a set of dilemmas that they are facing in implementing knowledge management.
2. Once a set of actual dilemmas has been constructed a questionnaire incorporating common dilemmas faced by managers will be used in selected organizations to determine how to diagnose dilemmas acting as barriers to knowledge management implementation.
We will create a five-choice questionnaire used by Trompenaars and Hampden Turner (2000) in their later research, as opposed to the dual choice questionnaire used to identify dilemmas. Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000: 353) have pointed out that this can tell us 'far more about how respondents function in 'normal conditions when researchers are seeking to slice their value systems into two or assail their integrity'.
3. Following this study, a tool will be developed to identify and reconcile dilemmas to help with the implementation of knowledge management.

As most students of Southern Cross University live and work in the Asia-Pacific countries it is anticipated that this research will add to the knowledge already existing in the databases held by Professor Trompenaars with a perspective from a different part of the World.

The authors have been in touch with Professor Trompenaars and Professor Woolliams about the proposed research.

Examples of Dilemmas posed by Organizational Culture

Following is a sample of typical dilemmas collected by the authors from organizations facing issues in improving knowledge management practices. The format used is similar to the on-line survey on dilemmas being collected through (Trompenaars 2004)

<http://www.thtconsulting.com/webcue2/example4.htm>

On the one hand	Whilst on the other hand
Teaching brings income to the school	Research brings reputation to academics and helps them share their knowledge
Teaching increases workload and reduces slack for academics	Research and publications require 'slack' time.

Example 2

This example concerns an organization whose service area, in rural Australia, covers an area about two-point-four times the size of the United Kingdom. The organization wants to maintain a regional presence and regional focus through being close to its customers. Being formed through a merger of three smaller companies resulted in a multiplicity of cultures. Various operational activities are triplicated in the organization; however, prudent economic management dictates that this be addressed. The intention is to establish 'virtual teams' that can share work and back each other up in busy times, and close down to one site in quiet periods. To achieve this, the local knowledge

Example 1

The Management School in a University teaches mainly fee-paying students. As such, the income of the school is dependent upon the number of students it can enrol in its courses and research programs.

The academics employed by this school are expected to teach, research, write materials and perform administrative duties on behalf of the school. Much of the time of these academic staff is taken up by teaching, writing study materials and supervising fee paying research students. But the criteria for promotion for the academics at the University are heavily biased towards publication. For academics to publish they need some slack in their workload to concentrate and conduct research. But the slack time comes at the cost of teaching time, reducing the income for the school. Publications are a way that academics can create and share knowledge with peers and develop themselves. A dilemma faced by the school and the academics is described as:

that many of the people have needs to be made available to all. Knowledge transfer such as this requires an environment of trust and respect, which can take some time to develop, especially in post-merger situations. The tyranny of distance has meant that alternatives to travel have to be used, an example of which is video conferencing.

Technological solutions such as video conferencing, e-mail and Intranets, tend to result in 'virtual teams. The literature on how to build virtual teams, generally recommends that people meet in person initially, so that personal bonds can be established, and trust develop. However, cost constraints, and needing to involve staff who are shift workers create a dilemma.

On the one hand	Whilst on the other hand
We want to establish a knowledge base built on combined local knowledge.	The post-merger environment lacks trust and knowledge transfer may not happen.
We want to reduce operational costs.	We don't want to transfer all staff to one central location, as it is against the policy of remaining regionally based.

Example 3

A telecommunication company is facing enormous challenges in a highly competitive marketplace. The effective management of knowledge is considered a key to sustained competitive advantage. The company's services division is deploying a KM

initiative throughout Europe based on solution centred support.

Solution centred support (SCS) is a process where the customer transaction is captured, codified, stored and reused for repeat customer problems. The codification strategy (Hansen, Nohria and Tierney, 1999) seeks to increase operational efficiency, improve customer satisfaction and increase

profitability by the effective management of knowledge.

Deployment of SCS has been extremely challenging and successful implementation will

require reconciliation of a number of dilemmas. The dilemmas can be represented as:

On the one hand	Whilst on the other hand
Global 'generic' support fault resolution process	Need to adapt to local requirements
Objectives set on an individual basis	Require knowledge sharing in teams

Converting Dilemmas into a Questionnaire

The dilemmas collected by the authors will be converted into generic dilemmas representing organizational culture issues faced in implementing knowledge management. The generic dilemma will be stated in the form of a questionnaire with five possible positions that the organization or manager can take to tackle the issue. Each of these questions will be constructed to represent a value dimension of common dilemmas on a grid so that the position adopted by the organization or manager can be charted based on the response to the questionnaire. The responses to the dilemmas will be used to gauge an organization's readiness to overcome cultural barriers. The responses would also be used to discuss ways in which such dilemmas can be reconciled to enable an effective implementation of a knowledge management initiative.

For example take the dilemma faced by the management school explained earlier. This could be a generic dilemma faced by an organization in getting the most out of its knowledge workers while providing the time and opportunity for personal development so that they can do their job better.

A typical set of positions that can be used with the management school example:

1. Academics are paid to teach. Research is for personal development that reduces teaching time. Academics can do research at their own time without affecting the teaching
2. Research is more important than teaching for professional development. The school can employ tutors to teach and let the academics do research and publish papers.
3. Teaching is important to the school and research is important to the academics. To motivate academics to teach the school can set aside time for the academics to do research by decreasing their workload

4. Teaching is important to the school, but if academics are only used for teaching, their knowledge of what is happening in their field may diminish reducing their effectiveness to teach well. The school can provide time for research to the academics by giving them special study leave to do research once in three years

5. While academics are paid to teach, doing research is important for them and the school as well. Research could also become a source of income for the school. The school should work with the academics to find ways in which research income can be increased and support their efforts to do the same.

Each of these positions represents extremes, apathy, compromise and synergy.

Conclusions

Managing knowledge has become a source of competitive advantage for organizations. Research has shown that organizational culture has a significant impact on implementing knowledge management in organizations. Therefore it is useful to develop a methodology or tools to evaluate the impact of organizational culture on knowledge management. Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars have used dilemma theory to investigate national and organizational culture successfully. Recently they have expressed views on how cultural dilemmas can be used to improve ways to implement knowledge management. This paper proposes a research methodology using dilemma theory to develop a tool to diagnose as well as find ways to help managers to evaluate their organizational culture so that they can take appropriate steps to change or work with their organizational culture to implement knowledge management successfully.

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About the Authors

Shankar Sankaran teaches knowledge management to MBA students and supervises doctoral students researching in the area of knowledge management. He also assists organizations implementing knowledge management as part of his research portfolio. Prior to joining academia he was a Director of Engineering at the regional headquarters of a Japanese multinational company.

Gerald Glover is Professor of Organizational Change at Hawaii Pacific University. He is trained as a cultural anthropologist and has been a consultant and researcher in change and development for thirty years. His current interests include culture and knowledge systems, adaptive leadership and measuring change

Simon Walker has over 20 years experience in the Telecommunications Industry incorporating senior management roles in service delivery in Australia, Ireland and United Kingdom. More recently, he has been leading the deployment of a knowledge management initiative throughout Europe. Owing to the major challenges deploying the initiative he is undertaking a Doctorate with SCU incorporating action research in the areas of Project Management, Organizational Culture and Knowledge management.

Paul James has over 32 years experience in asset management, working for a number of electrical distributors in New South Wales, Australia. During this time, he has held a variety of positions in the engineering side of the industry including being the Manager of Asset Operations at Great Southern Energy. More recently, he has been involved with the analysis, development and implementation of information systems required for the support of maintenance management, asset management and network operations. Out of this work, came an interest in knowledge management, due to the suboptimal results achieved from the information systems, and the loss of knowledge in the electricity industry through downsizing. Paul is currently undertaking a Doctorate with Southern Cross University, researching the areas of Strategic Management and Knowledge Management.