

Overcoming barriers to knowledge management: visiting the dark side of organisations

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Synopsis

This research paper concerns the barriers to effective knowledge management practice presented by the dark side of organisational behaviour.

Abstract

Like many organisational endeavours, the success of knowledge management praxis is subject to the vagaries of human nature. There are many reasons, most of which are underpinned by the need for power, why people might choose to hoard, distort and manipulate information. Recent studies undertaken by the authors have demonstrated the way in which knowledge management processes can also be manipulated to impede the distribution of power. This dark side of organisational behaviour is usually subversive, can be unconscious or conscious and always acts against the interests of the group or part of the group. It is important for those involved in knowledge management practice to be acutely aware of the dynamics of the dark side and how they may interfere with their best intentions. As well as describing this phenomenon, this paper also suggests a number of ways in which the dark side might be overcome. Chiefly, drawing on general systems theory, we suggest some techniques that facilitate both open communication and open process.

Keywords

Knowledge management practice; the dark side of organisations; search conference; power; grounded theory.

Subverting knowledge management practice

In 2005 King and Hase undertook an action research project with the aim of improving knowledge management practices within a hospital department. One of the most important findings of the study was the capacity of a single person to interfere with knowledge transfer in the first place and to later undermine the knowledge management systems developed in order to improve organisational effectiveness. The reason for this quite destructive behaviour was in order for that person to maintain power and control. The effect on the other members of the organisation was feelings of helplessness, low morale, low skill development, and stress.

For the organisation, and ultimately the patients, the effect of this behaviour became extremely debilitating. The crisis came when the person subverting the knowledge management process unexpectedly had to be absent from the workplace for a number of

weeks. Given the lack of shared knowledge about administrative processes in particular, the functioning of the organisation was hopelessly compromised, as was the care of patients.

We mention this experience not because it is particularly unusual as we are sure that many process, change and knowledge management consultants and researchers would be very much aware of conscious and unconscious subversion in organisations. Rather the story provides a backdrop to this paper which concerns the dark side of the organisation and the implementation of knowledge management practices. We discuss below some processes used to overcome aspects of the dark side that specifically relate to the sharing of information and a research project evaluating their effectiveness and effect.

Knowledge management and the dark side of the organisation

Knowledge management practitioners have tended to focus on the technical aspects of their work (Hariharan 2002). However, Hariharan and others (Davenport et al. 1998; Greengard 1998; Pfeffer & Sutton 1999) contend that the 'people' aspects of knowledge management are a greater problem than the technical. Furthermore, it is well known that perhaps the greatest barrier to knowledge sharing is dysfunctional behaviour on the part of individuals and organisational culture (Skyrme 1997; De Long & Fahey 2000). Certainly knowledge management practice depends on a high level of goodwill and trust. As Davenport (1998) posits, knowledge sharing might be viewed as an unnatural act. If knowledge is so valuable why would anyone want to give it away? This idea alludes to the familiar adage that knowledge is power.

The literature on the dark side of the organisation has, until recently, largely taken a sociological perspective; a function more of the vagaries of systems rather than purposefulness on the part of individuals. For example, early thinking about the dark side by Merton (1968) was based on the assumption that a system of action would produce secondary consequences that did not serve its interests. Thus, in accord with Durkheim, order and disorder are seen as natural or systematic consequences of the normal functioning of a system (Vaughan 1999). A rather more rationalist perspective based on Weber is that organisations reduce individual power, which then results in dysfunctional behaviour (Coleman 1974). According to Vaughan (1999, p. 289) misconduct in organisations can be expected because, '...structures, processes and tasks are opportunity structures for misconduct because they provide (a) normative support for misconduct, (b) the means for carrying out violations, and (c) concealment that minimises detection and sanctioning.' One only has to look at the recent corporate violations, such as the Enron debacle, to understand this legitimisation of organisational violations. Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) take the view that it is more useful to view misbehaviour by individuals from a sociological perspective, rather than as some sort of pathology on the part of the person. Similarly the anthropological view is that the dark side needs to be viewed through a cultural lens (e.g. Jordan 2002; Sinclair 1998).

More recently, these sociological views have been countered by a more psychological perspective that places the onus for misbehaviour on the individual. This notion has become popularised recently through Bakan's (2004) book, 'The Corporation' and the documentary of the same name. The book and the documentary are scathing of the unconscionable behaviour of corporate executives. We have also seen a burgeoning literature develop about the effects of bullying and other abusive behaviour in organisations. Abusive behaviour can include inappropriate use of power, sarcasm, intimidation, dishonesty and negativeness on the part of managers. Work stress has also been construed as a form of abuse (Wyatt & Hare 1997). Violations of the psychological contract has also been seen as a cause of individual distress

(Rousseau 2001) with dire consequences for the organisation in terms of: workplace tension and disharmony (Brooks and Harfield, 2000); negative health effects (Kivimaki et al., 2001); and psychological ill-health (Tepper, 2001). Hase, Kouzmin, Sankaran, & Kakadabase (2004) also suggest that a breach of psychological contract occurs when employees give away their intellectual property in the guise of knowledge management with very little reward or acknowledgement.

Psychopathology has also been identified as a major source of dark side behaviour. The corporate psychopath has been the source of particular interest in understanding destructive behaviour towards others in organisations (e.g. Bakan 2004; Hughes et al. 1999). One explanation for this phenomenon is again sociological in that management attracts this type of psychopathology, the assumption being that psychopathic traits are essential for being able to deal with the cut and thrust of ordinary organisational politics (Buchanan & Badham 1999). Bakan (2004) also points out that it is the CEO's job and legal responsibility to protect the share price and the bottom-line. This responsibility is more compatible with dark side traits than with more humanistic behaviours.

No matter the particular orientation to understanding the dark side of the organisation, it seems clear that it may have profound negative effects on organisational effectiveness, the public, the individual employee or a combination of these. As can be seen from our brief story at the beginning of the paper, the dark side can have a negative effect on the human side of knowledge management practice, which depends on a positive attitude and culture, and trust, sharing and confidence in others.

The question therefore becomes how these dark side issues can be dealt with as part of the knowledge development planning process to ensure that an optimum environment for knowledge sharing can occur. The experience we had in the knowledge management exercise in the hospital setting described above led us to think about using a set of interventions based on general systems theory and known broadly as a search conference to deal with dark side issues.

Due to the changing nature of employment that results from restructuring or downsizing on the part of the organisation and the career aspirations of subject matter experts (who tend to leave organisations once they feel that they have learnt enough), the days of life type employment are disappearing. Therefore staff have no incentive or motivation to share their knowledge for the common good. Experts generally feel that knowledge is power and therefore are unwilling to share it. They consider the value of knowledge as stock rather than flow. In some organisations Sankaran and his doctoral students have been involved in knowledge management implementation where 'dark side' characteristics have been observed:

1. When an organisation-wide information technology project was being implemented a pilot knowledge management project received no support from top management even though they were keen to try out some knowledge management tools for the pilot.
2. When a global knowledge management program was being implemented local officers appointed 'knowledge champions' to promote the intervention, only to provide 'lip service' to the headquarters initiative. The local champions took very little initiative to support the global program.

3. The term knowledge management itself was a problem in the organisation when top management was not able to differentiate between knowledge management and information management. The knowledge management project got support only after top management was convinced that it would add value to the information system investments in the organisation.

The Intervention

Over the last eight years through over 50 interventions in 26 organisations one of the authors (Davies) has progressively developed a diagnostic/planning tool that is a cross between a SWOT analysis and a Delphi process. With Hase he evaluated the experience and outcomes of this process by way of convergent interviewing that involved 16 participants from nine of these organisations. While the evaluation showed that the process, undertaken in the month leading up to a planning or problem-solving workshop, provided robust, considered, informed and prioritised planning data, it also demonstrated that it enabled 'dark side' issues to be raised and confronted. The process and the research are described below.

The development of the process

Davies had been conducting various forms of organisational diagnostic/planning workshops based around the search conference technique since the late 1960s. The search conference is derived from general systems theory and is a highly participative process designed to fully harness the capacity of the organisation. One important component of these workshops he incorporated into the process in the 1970s was the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis. The process starts with an environmental scan after which participants identify, using a nominal group technique, the opportunities and threats for the organisation derived from the scan. The strengths and weaknesses focus on the internal capacity of the organisation to deal with the world it has envisioned. Participants then prioritise, using a voting system, the outcomes of the SWOT. The prioritisation is an attempt to ensure that there is some convergence among participants regarding the issues raised.

Davies gradually became concerned about the effectiveness of the SWOT analysis and prioritisation he had been using in the workshop process. The contributions were public and the brainstorming nature of the process and the quick-fire prioritisation did not appear to allow people to come to a considered view. The process usually finished up with the right general issues, however the wording of the issues tended to be general and thereby masked underlying and connected issues. This left a feeling of superficiality among participants that appeared to detract from commitment to outcomes generated further down the track in the workshop process. Coupled with this, the workshops had been designed to be held over a minimum of two to three days. However, increasing financial and staffing pressures meant that the planning process often had to be cut down to one day or a night and a day at best. Thus key processes that got to the heart of organisational capacity and fed into the generation of strategic initiatives became even more rushed and hopelessly compromised.

It became clear that the workshop had to be redesigned. It was decided that the precious collective time of the workshop had to be kept for those matters/outcomes that could best or only be dealt with/achieved if all stakeholders were in the room. Thus the less pressured individual time in advance of the workshop was designated for those activities that could be undertaken as well or better individually. Furthermore it was thought that this might provide greater confidentiality and the time to think in a low pressure environment, thereby increasing the validity, reliability and extent of the issues raised. Given the concerns about the veracity

of the environmental scan and SWOT analysis they were the obvious choice as processes to be undertaken prior to the workshop itself.

Using the new workshop format, Davies negotiated with sponsors to undertake the data collection phase of the SWOT by questionnaire. The collated findings were then fed back to participants prior to the workshop and prioritised in the workshop. The removal of time pressures meant that the issues raised in the SWOT analysis could be more considered and participants could raise more issues than could have been accommodated in the workshop environment. The perceived anonymity of this process led to a broadening of the issue that was listed, particularly in the identification of 'weaknesses', 'the organisational environment' and the 'threats'. Some of the issues that became more evident in this anonymous process involved: blaming and naming managers, identification of conflict, the effects of unionist behaviour, governance, the impact of role groups, relationships and problematic individual behaviour. When the list of issues were presented to the participants and were prioritised in the workshop setting, most of these more controversial and 'dark side' issues were swept under the carpet as most were not prepared to be seen to support them in public, even though in private they would say they were accurate. This surfaced, but unprocessed, organisational criticism initially soured the climate as participants examined the issues. However, the more considered nature of the rest of the data that was given a high priority, usually contributed to a better climate overall and greater commitment to agreed outcomes.

There was pressure on the facilitator (Davies) to summarise the individual contributions and massage the critical and personal comments with care. Davies found that summarising like comments into a manageable number of category statements often lost the intent and context that were the core concerns of the majority of the group. This again led to a sense of frustration that the real issue had not been dealt with.

Given these apparent flaws in the process that did not enable important 'dark side' issues to be dealt with, Davies again decided to improve the approach. He introduced a second step in the SWOT analysis prior to the workshop using a modified Delphi approach. All of the unedited responses to the SWOT analysis (collected anonymously) were entered on a spreadsheet and grouped into categories that made sense to Davies given his current but limited knowledge of the organisational history and context of the data. The categorisation was undertaken to assist participants wade through the mass of information when it came to prioritising the data. Depending on the number of issues, participants were given five or ten votes to cast on the items that were most important and best expressed their views. Participants spent all their votes on one item or spread their votes over several depending on the strength of their opinion.

These were then summed and prioritised, and two lists were made. One consisted of the categorised issues and a second with the specific original wording of the issue so that participants could see how the categorisation process had been undertaken and make comment if needed. The response list also contained information about issues with respect to role and location (but not individual identity) so that sectoral issues did not get lost in the voting.

This approach produced dramatic differences in the value placed on the summarised data by participants and enabled it to be effectively incorporated into the broader planning process. It also allowed some of the key dark side issues to be dealt with publicly. Legitimate criticism of individuals, managers, relationships, organisational functioning, conflict and other role

groups were also able to get on the table. However those views held strongly by individuals but not supported by others people in the organisation were eliminated and not given currency. Furthermore, all could see which issues were considered legitimate for the group as a whole.

The reader should contact Davies on atdavies@bigpond.com if interested in the specific details of the methodology such as; face-to-face and written communication with participants; instructions to the participants at various stages of the process; questionnaire structure and processing; spreadsheet structure and manipulation; workshop design; and mechanics of the voting process, all of which are important in the establishing the legitimacy of the process and the honesty and independence of the facilitator. Careful negotiation of the process steps is critical to developing a willingness to commit to and participate in the process and preparedness to implement outcomes on the part of the participants. These details were covered in more detail in a workshop conducted at this conference.

As mentioned above this methodology has been developed and applied over a number of occasions with a variety of organisations. Davies and Hase decided to evaluate the process with particular emphasis on how effective it was in raising and dealing with dark side issues.

The evaluation

Davies and Hase used a Grounded Theory approach (Glaser 1978) and a convergent interviewing technique (Dick 2000) to evaluate the effectiveness of the revised process in dealing with dark side issues. Interviewees were initially asked the extent to which the planning process had managed to unearth and deal with hitherto unspoken issues in the organisation. Follow-up questions depended on the response from the interviewee and on the themes developed from previous interviewees.

Sampling was purposeful with each interview based on seeking the best opportunity for disconfirmation. Thus a range of people were interviewed involving CEOs, middle managers, professional staff, and administrative staff who had been involved in a planning process undertaken by Davies. The researchers met after each round of interviews to look for common and conflicting evidence, and then sought to clarify the reasons for the conflicting evidence in the next round of interviews. The process stopped when a consistent, unchanging and explainable view of the process emerged (saturation). Thus common themes gradually emerged and analysis was ongoing. A total of 16 interviews were undertaken with people from nine organisations.

The results

The key themes developed from the interviews relating to the darks side of the organisation are listed below.

- The process generates anxiety but is judged to be worth it given the value of the outcomes that otherwise would not have been achieved.
- The process exposes rumours and myths that have little or no support beyond the originator and, as a consequence, they fall away.
- The process exposes rumours and myths that have support beyond the originator and, as a consequence, puts them on the formal agenda to be tested and clarified and, if found to have substance, to be acted upon.
- General staff don't see the strategic significance of dealing publicly with the dark side, whereas managers do.

- Stereotypes can be challenged and legitimated or blown away.
- The process always led to a questioning of the neutrality of the facilitator.
- The content always surprised management. Management always thought they were over all the issues, and that none had been kept from them.
- People always say they can tell the originator of the issue. But, in Davies' experience (he knew who contributed what in the case of an e-mail survey, or the role group in the case of a written response) they are usually wrong, showing that managers manipulate information to confirm their prejudices and stereotypes.
- Enables break-through in some otherwise stalemated areas.
- The process becomes easier with repeated use (some interviewees had experienced the process more than once).
- The advantages outweighed the disadvantages.
- Can expose interpersonal conflicts that then require further interventions such as mediation. A painful process but it gets the issues out on the table that are bubbling away underneath and affecting relationships and function anyway.
- Controlling behaviour on the part of managers, and dependent behaviour on the part of employees is exposed as preventing real information flow.

Other general themes:

- Gave greater focus to the explicit planning, and problem-solving agenda.
- Increased participant confidence that the agenda and language reflected the real issues and hence commitment to implementation of agreed recommendations.
- The revised process saved time
- Was the process ethical?
- If the process caused confrontation could it lead to litigation?

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the process designed by Davies is relatively robust in enabling normally undiscussable issues to be raised in a relatively safe setting. It is clear that disclosure has some risks. Mostly this causes a modicum of anxiety. However, there is a risk that naming people or enabling people to be identified carries some risk of creating emotional distress, such as anger or guilt, among other things. Thus careful preparation needs to be undertaken prior to the process with respect to identifying long standing conflict or relationship difficulties.

One of the strengths of the approach is that it reveals myths and strong views not shared by the group but perhaps held and perpetuated by a single individual. This appears to have a very useful effect since everyone can see that the issue is not sustainable. Furthermore, this occurs in a relatively non-threatening way. Alternatively, if an issue has traction then it is important enough to be dealt with.

As Hase, Davies and Dick (1999) have pointed out in a presentation of their revised version of the Johari Window, people will be selective about what they choose to disclose about themselves and what they know about others. This leads to all sorts of dark side behaviours that have been mentioned earlier in this paper. Given that knowledge management depends on the preparedness of people to share information and go beyond issues largely centred around self-interest it is important to expose potential barriers to knowledge management implementation. The process described above that is largely focused on information exchange

may well be useful in the initial implementation phase of knowledge management implementation.

The business process re-engineering phenomenon that caused massive downsizing in the last decade has made people suspicious about new initiatives like knowledge management. Staff start thinking that this is another reason to get rid of them. This increases the resistance to change to adopt a knowledge management culture. Knowledge management initiatives do not require massive restructuring like business process re-engineering. What is required is to move away from the silo mentality and move to a knowledge-sharing culture. The dark side of the organisation also causes barriers to knowledge management. So the dilemma for the knowledge management practitioner is to find a way for staff to share knowledge even when the organisation has a functional structure in silos? While setting up communities of practice could increase cross-functional collaboration, such communities do not prosper in a command and control environment. Communities of practice should be voluntary but recognised and rewarded by the organisation. But in many knowledge management initiatives management cannot resist the temptation to demand that communities of practice are formed as they have frowned on 'informal networks' in the past. To facilitate a climate where communities would form voluntarily and grow is a challenge for any organisation.

Conclusion

There are many psychological, social and organisational development tools which address dark side issues in individuals, families, voluntary, public and private organisations. However, not all are appropriate for use in organisations. The process described in this paper may well provide an ethical, cost effective and workable approach to dealing with potential barriers to knowledge management in an organisation.

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