
Overcoming cultural barriers to sharing knowledge

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Abstract

Culture is often seen as the key inhibitor of effective knowledge sharing. A study of companies where sharing knowledge is built into the culture found that they did not change their culture to match their knowledge management initiatives. They adapted their approach to knowledge management to fit their culture. They did this by: linking sharing knowledge to solving practical business problems; tying sharing knowledge to a pre-existing core value; introducing knowledge management in a way that matches the organization's style; building on existing networks people use in their daily work; and encouraging peers and supervisors to exert pressure to share.

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Recently a large global company set up a sophisticated Web site for employees stationed overseas to share knowledge. It had areas for chat, document storage, and messages from the company's leadership. It was cleverly segmented so you could look up information in many different ways, even browse through different views. When the designers interviewed potential users during the development process, most said a Web site for sharing with their peers was a good idea. The designers expected people to load lots of documents on to the site. But even though it was interesting, easy to use, and had many features, hardly anyone visited it. Most document areas were empty, except for the seed information the designers entered. Potential users said that they liked it, but just didn't have time for it.

The Web site designers felt that they hit the "culture" wall. While there may have been many reasons people did not use the site, the designers, like many facing failed knowledge management efforts, felt that cultural resistance was the primary one. Even though people said sharing was a good idea, the site designers felt that sharing was not built into the culture enough for people to actually take the time to do it.

How do you overcome "cultural barriers" to sharing knowledge? The American Productivity & Quality Center (APQC) recently conducted a study of companies known to have a corporate culture that supports sharing knowledge. From literature reviews we identified 40 companies known to share knowledge effectively. A qualifying survey in which we probed to see if company representatives felt that sharing knowledge was a natural part of the culture narrowed our candidates down to about a dozen. Using the results of a second, more extensive survey, we identified five companies to visit face-to-face:

- (1) American Management Systems
- (2) Ford Motor Company
- (3) Lotus Development Corporation
- (4) National Semiconductor Corporation
- (5) PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP.

In these face-to-face interviews we were able to discuss and observe the culture of the organization more closely.

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Culture does play an important role in the success of a knowledge management effort. We found many examples where well-designed knowledge management tools and processes failed because people believed they were already sharing well enough, that senior managers did not really support it, or that, like other programs, it too would blow over. In fact, our central finding is that, however strong your commitment and approach to knowledge management, your culture is stronger. Companies that successfully implement knowledge management do not try to change their culture to fit their knowledge management approach. They build their knowledge management approach to fit their culture. As a result, there is not one right way to get people to share, but many different ways depending on the values and style of the organization.

Visible and invisible dimensions of culture

Understanding corporate culture

For this study, we used a definition of culture that helped us see its multiple levels (Figure 1). Following Schein (1985), we defined culture as the shared values, beliefs and practices of the people in the organization. Culture is reflected in the visible aspects of the organization, like its mission and espoused values. But culture exists on a deeper level as well, embedded in the way people act, what they expect of each other and how they make sense of each other's actions. Finally, culture is rooted in the organization's core values and assumptions. Often these are not only unarticulated, but so taken-for-granted that they are hard to articulate, invisible to organizational members. Because

of these layers of culture, people can often act in ways inconsistent with the organization's articulated mission and values, but consistent with its underlying or core values. Following this definition, in an organization with a knowledge sharing culture, people would share ideas and insights because they see it as natural, rather than something they are forced to do. They would expect it of each other and assume that sharing ideas is the right thing to do.

Organization culture is not homogeneous. There are always subcultures, sometimes simply different from the organization as a whole, sometimes in opposition to it. Even in organizations that strongly support sharing knowledge, we found pockets that were more and less supportive. Organizations vary a great deal on how widely held core values are. Sometimes the core values we identified seemed to be shared throughout the organization. Sometimes they seemed to be particular to the business unit we researched. But in either case, they seemed to be deeply held.

The visible dimension

The most obvious place to begin understanding an organization's culture is to read the espoused values, philosophy and mission. These statements say something about the culture, even if they are more aspirations than reality. As the director of knowledge management for American Management Systems said, "Our culture makes us who we are: a company defined by its people, their talent, and the opportunity to do some pretty amazing things."

An organization's culture is also reflected in its structure, stories, and spaces. Multi-layered hierarchies or flat structures say something about the core values that directed the organization's designers, and the expectations of its members. The stories that circulate through the organization often reflect important aspects of the culture. At Lotus we heard a well-circulated story about how a Lotus employee checked into her Notes database while in the hospital awaiting surgery. Connecting the network was that important to her. Stories communicate what attitudes and actions are in-bounds or out of bounds. Even physical structures, like buildings, décor and office layout can reflect cultural assumptions.

Figure 1



Together these visible elements of the organization are the artifacts of its culture, the “things” in which the culture is embedded. To those who know the core values of the organization, they speak volumes, reinforcing the organization’s values. Three of our findings relate to this visible dimension of culture:

- (1) There is a visible link between sharing knowledge and solving practical business problems.
- (2) The approach, tools and structures to support knowledge sharing match the overall style of the organization.
- (3) Reward and recognition systems support sharing knowledge.

The invisible dimension

On a deeper level, most organizations have an unspoken set of core values that guide both what people do and how they make sense of each other’s actions. When boiled down to their essence they are often simple precepts like “Do good technical work”, “Be a good soldier”, “Don’t say anything bad directly to others”, “Be careful to avoid risk”, or “Always put up a good fight for your position”. These values become the “seen but unspoken” background of the organization. While anyone with tenure in the organization can recognize them, they often have trouble articulating them. Two of our key findings relate to this dimension of culture:

- (1) Sharing knowledge is tightly linked to a pre-existing core value of the organization.
- (2) Networks for sharing knowledge build on existing networks people use in their daily work.

Behavior links the visible and invisible dimensions. Spanning these two layers of culture – the visible artifacts and the invisible values – is the behavior of organizational members. Core values are usually not communicated through orientation programs, but through how the established organizational members act, speak, and interpret the organization around them. For example, in a company that strongly values complete technical work, people routinely perform extensive technical analyses, ask each other about the technical basis for a conclusion or decision, criticize or praise the technical quality of each other’s work, and discuss other people’s technical background.

Their behavior reflects a strong shared belief in the value of good technical work.

Frequently the values of the organization are carried by small groups of people who have regular contact, working together or sharing ideas and experiences. These teams and peer groups are the vehicles through which expectations are communicated. One of our findings relates to this dimension: peers and immediate supervisors of those actively involved in sharing knowledge support, even exert pressure to share. There is an appropriate level of senior management involvement.

Reading a culture

How did we discover from a survey and a six-hour interview what the core values of the organization are, or at least the values of the part of it we were dealing with? Of course, we asked. But the people we interviewed were frequently unable to say. So we had to dig a bit. We used three people to conduct the interviews; one to ask questions, another to take notes and a third to listen and probe for culture-revealing elements. As company representatives talked about the organization’s history and values, we probed for how the company and people in it demonstrated those values and listened to the underlying message in the stories they told. When people talked about how their knowledge management approach worked day-to-day, we probed to find what people in the company considered acceptable things to do, looking for underlying values. Frequently we asked why they had taken a particular approach. Why not a popular alternative? This often elicited a response full of telling information about values that distinguish their organization. In every case we corroborated our observations with those we interviewed. Frequently, we discovered that they knew more about the organization than they themselves realized.

Of course, in this short time we could only delve a little into the organization’s values. There are certainly many more we could not see. We did not try to identify all the company’s core values, only those that seemed to be directly shaping their approach to knowledge management. We dug just below the surface. There are undoubtedly much deeper values than the ones we identified. But we believe we heard and

observed enough to see the tie between core values and knowledge sharing.

Making sharing knowledge visibly important

Share knowledge to solve practical business problems

All the best-practice companies we studied see sharing knowledge as a practical way to solve business problems. They repeatedly emphasize that databases, knowledge systems, and knowledge initiatives need to have a clear business purpose. Best-practice organizations could easily describe how sharing knowledge contributes to business goals. In fact, they overwhelmingly said that, in their experience, the main reason knowledge management programs fail is a lack of a clear connection with a business goal. There are three different ways they tie sharing knowledge to the business:

- (1) *Make sharing knowledge directly part of the business strategy.* Several companies integrated sharing knowledge into their business strategy. For example, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) has built sharing knowledge into its business strategy and brand identity. In PwC's brand, "People, knowledge, and worlds", knowledge is the link between the company and its clients. PwC has an extensive and visible organizational structure for knowledge management, a global CKO, a CKO for each of six business lines and a substantial staff devoted to knowledge management. American Management Systems (AMS) also makes sharing knowledge an explicit part of its business strategy. Sharing knowledge is the way AMS plans to meet one of its overall business goals: to operate as one firm. Moreover, a key strategic focus at AMS is to leverage its internal knowledge around core competencies. To do this, AMS has developed several knowledge-sharing mechanisms including a best practices group, a center for advanced technologies, and nine knowledge centers. Senior managers also reinforce this visible connection between knowledge sharing and the business strategy. At the annual senior staff conference, the chairman stated that

AMS will leverage knowledge across the company as a part of its overall business strategy.

- (2) *Piggyback sharing knowledge on to another key business initiative.* Some companies approach sharing knowledge obliquely. Ford's product development group does not talk about "knowledge management" or "sharing knowledge". Instead, sharing knowledge is part of another large-scale company initiative, Ford 2000. This initiative restructured the division into a matrix organization to make Ford more of a process-oriented company. It organized the company into three product centers:
 - small cars;
 - large cars; and
 - trucks.Ford 2000 was also designed to enable global product development by creating global product development teams linked by a standard CAD system and open intranet access to other projects. This enabled team members to review other teams' analyses of similar design elements. In the past, information was disjointed and inconsistent. Ford 2000 put all development teams on the same CAD system. Previously, islands of information were prevalent and varying degrees of quality were found throughout the company. Today the intranet enables all engineers, both internal and external contractors, to communicate, share information and use common templates. Similarly, all changes to the specifications for each vehicle are made electronically through the online change control process. Development teams are required to share knowledge and insights at specific development milestones. Ford 2000 is linked with another strategic objective: reducing complexity. In product development this translates to reducing the product development cycle time by avoiding "reinvention of the wheel". These initiatives are the mechanisms through which sharing knowledge is enabled in Ford.
- (3) *Share knowledge routinely as the "way we work".* Some companies approach sharing knowledge in an even more low-key manner. In this approach sharing knowledge is simply part of how the company solves specific business problems, such as reducing time to

market or developing innovative software solutions. Several of the organizations that took this approach do not even speak internally of sharing or managing knowledge. They simply build sharing knowledge into the overall business solution.

Lotus Development, for example, does not have an enterprise-wide, top-down knowledge management initiative. But as the “inventor of collaborative technology”, Lotus considers collaboration to be one of its core competencies. Sharing insights with others – through Lotus Notes databases – is simply the Lotus way of doing business: solving problems, developing customer solutions, and creating sales strategies. Consulting Lotus databases is how Lotus employees start defining a business problem and approach its solution. Because sharing knowledge is so tied to everyday business problem solving, there are many different approaches to sharing knowledge at Lotus. Some departments make checking with others part of standard work processes. Others simply leave it up to the individual to seek and share insights.

Whether part of the business strategy or simply part of a department’s work process, all of our best practice companies make a visible connection between sharing knowledge and the business. Where knowledge sharing is tied directly to the business strategy, senior managers visibly endorsed and articulated its value. Where knowledge sharing is tied to solving a large-scale or specific business problem, progress toward that solution is the main measure of its value. Where embedded in a company’s way of doing business, sharing knowledge is hardly seen as a separate activity.

Match the style of the organization

Best-practice organizations also vary a great deal in the look and feel of their knowledge sharing efforts. Some talk directly about the importance of sharing knowledge, have official knowledge sharing events, charter knowledge sharing communities, conduct internal advertising, etc. Others have a small knowledge sharing support staff and avoid the term “knowledge management” or anything else that could seem like a corporate emphasis. The degree of formality, structure, physical resources, and language used to describe the effort matched the overall

environment of each organization. This is very different from many “change programs” of the past two decades, where the “look and feel” of the change program itself was laid on top of the corporate culture. Instead, the look and feel of knowledge sharing is being adapted to the style of the organization.

Ford, for example, frequently uses company-wide initiatives, with senior-level corporate attention, to initiate change. Ford’s Business Leadership Initiative and Ford 2000 are both examples of high visibility company-wide initiatives. To introduce its intranet strategy and the tools for sharing knowledge, Ford conducted a large-scale awareness campaign and made face-to-face presentations to more than 25,000 people in less than a year. But in that campaign, Ford did not mention the idea of knowledge management or directly encourage people to share. Instead it simply implemented common data storage and collaboration software and demonstrated how that system could save team members time gathering information and checking potential problems. Since Ford is, as one manager put it, a top-down hierarchical company, this very visible, directed approach fit well with their culture.

At Lotus, on the other hand, such a “programmed” approach would be doomed to fail. Despite its merger with IBM, Lotus is still dominated by the “jeans and Hawaiian shirt” culture of software development. Work is often done by informal teams. A group simply identifies something that needs to be done and forms a team to pursue it. The software development culture is also very forgiving on project completions. Projects do not have to be perfect the first time. Rather, employees feel free to “try things out” and modify what does not work. Knowledge management at Lotus reflects this informality. There is no knowledge management function or a CKO. Some individual functions, including sales, support, and education, have teams that coordinate and facilitate knowledge sharing within that function and across the enterprise. Other functions do not. Each function has its own approaches to knowledge sharing based on its business needs. But even with this informality and inconsistency, or perhaps because of it, Lotus employees do regularly, habitually check with others, build on others’ ideas, and share their own insights.

Underlying the informality at Lotus is a common language for thinking, document, writing, and sharing ideas: Lotus Notes. Both teams and individuals use Lotus Notes for many aspects of their work, both work in progress as well as finished documents. More than any other company we visited, people at Lotus live in an electronic world. Sharing ideas both within and across teams also happens in Notes. As one Lotus employee said, establishing a database for sharing knowledge, no matter how informal the group, is an “automatic reflex” that reflects the technological basis at Lotus.

Rather than prescribing whether knowledge management efforts should be led from the top, measured, or built into rewards, our findings suggest that it is most important for the style of your effort to match how things get done in your organization.

Align reward and recognition to support sharing knowledge

None of the best practice companies thought reward and recognition systems could effectively motivate people to share knowledge. But reward and recognition is another way to make the importance of sharing knowledge visible. It highlights the things the company feels are important and demonstrates that the time and energy people spend sharing knowledge “counts” in their performance and career. While all the best practice companies felt that aligning reward and recognition is important, only those that integrated sharing knowledge into their business strategy and held knowledge sharing “events” actually did build specific line items on sharing knowledge into reward and recognition. At AMS, for example, sharing knowledge is a criterion to get to the highest rating on a performance evaluation. AMS tracks the frequency with which people use reports contributed to the knowledge base and this information is incorporated into promotion discussions. AMS recognizes contributions to its knowledge centers through annual awards, such as the “Knowledge in action” and “Best practices awards”. Companies that built sharing knowledge into daily work processes included sharing knowledge as a general part of their performance appraisal.

Build on invisible values

Build on a core value of the organization

The leaders of KM efforts at these companies were extremely well tuned into the core values of their organizations, sometimes more than they themselves realized. They tightly wove the justification and language of sharing knowledge into a pre-existing core value of the organization. The companies we studied did not describe sharing knowledge as a “new direction”, a “change program” or a shift in values, even when they did engender a shift in values and behavior. Instead, they described it as a way to enable people to pursue a core value of the organization more fully.

“Collaborating” at Lotus, “leveraging” your work at AMS, or “complete analysis” at Ford are all examples of language that reflects pre-existing core cultural values. Because these core values are widely held throughout the organization, linking knowledge sharing to them gave it considerable weight. This link enabled people to share their own knowledge and use the ideas of others because they believe in the original core values, not because they believe in knowledge sharing itself. This made sharing knowledge a more natural step that required less convincing than a direct change campaign.

At AMS “leveraging” what you know by educating colleagues, writing, helping others, and teaching junior staff members has been central to the company since its inception. “Leveraging” what you know is how you build a reputation as a world class thought leader. Without evidence of leveraging it is not possible to be promoted to a leadership role. As a senior AMS manager said, “It’s not what you know that gives you power; it’s what you share about what you know that gives you power.” As a result, AMS has always had many informal networks through which people found and offered help. Since AMS also has a very informal culture, titles are not a barrier to getting help, and staff can drop in on anyone in the organization, even those at the highest level, expecting them to pause in their work to help. When the company was small and housed in a single location, this informal networking was a natural part of people’s daily work. People shared technical knowledge informally around the coffee pot. Now that AMS has grown and has offices around the globe, informal networking is more difficult. The “coffee pot” just does not

scale to a global level. So the structures for sharing knowledge developed by AMS simply enable “leveraging” for a larger and more globally distributed network.

Ford’s product development division, on the other hand, built sharing knowledge on a completely different set of values. Ford has traditionally emphasized the importance of complete staff work, making sure analyses are complete, potential mistakes identified and avoided. Checking analyses and avoiding mistakes is very much part of Ford’s “traditional hierarchy” culture. A Ford internal report, completed in 1995, demonstrated the need for sharing knowledge. Ford examined the number of times that the same problems recurred and discovered that problems often recurred within three months, even on the same team. This level of recurring errors does not “fit” Ford’s culture. The common CAD system and open intranet accesses introduced in Ford 2000 enabled team members to review other team’s analyses of similar design elements. This gave them an even wider arch in which to identify and avoid potential design pitfalls. It also enabled senior managers to look at actual data during progress reviews rather than “massaged” reports. Ford’s 2000 *has* dramatically changed the way people work. Product developers regularly consult others outside their team and reviews are much more of a discussion of the data and conclusion rather than presentation and approval. Ford made this transition by emphasizing a value the organization already held: complete risk-avoiding analyses. Sharing knowledge grew naturally out of enabling people to act more effectively on a value they already held.

Core values typically embody what people really consider important, what they think is key to getting ahead and “playing the game” of life in that organization, even when they don’t talk about their organization’s underlying values. Building on one of these core values is key to creating a culture that supports sharing knowledge. It is interesting that the core value you build on does not need to be directly about sharing knowledge. Ford’s value of avoiding mistakes is as good a starting point as AMS’s value of leveraging. Of course, finding an organizational value to serve as a springboard to sharing knowledge can be very difficult.

Build on existing networks

Like most companies, AMS, Ford, PWC, and Lotus are laced with informal human networks that people use to find who knows what, get help and advice, learn how to use specialized tools, etc. While some of these networks are purely social, many form around sharing the knowledge people need to do their job. Most of these informal networks have operated without any formal sanction for years. Their members trust each other and feel obliged to share information and insights with each other. Through these informal networks, individuals get appreciation from their peers and oftentimes form strong personal relationships (McDermott, 1999).

Rather than building new networks for sharing knowledge, the companies we studied built on already existing ones. In some cases they formalized them into official knowledge sharing networks. In other cases they lightly authorized them by giving them a budget, information systems, space, library support, time for network coordinators to manage network affairs, and recognition of their contribution. Whichever approach they took, best practice companies legitimated networks that already existed and tried to enhance their ability to maintain expertise about topics important to the company. Even in “official” networks, most companies tried to keep the informal, self-governing character of the networks. They did not dictate who should be part of a network, assign them major projects, and direct them to focus on specific issues, or dictate the way they should work.

AMS has two kinds of networks, knowledge centers, focused on selected topics the company considers important, and special interest groups (SIGs), which are informal and can be formed by anyone. The knowledge centers are organized around the company’s core competencies. While anyone can read the material developed by the knowledge center, core members are nominated to participate. They make most of the contributions and contract with the knowledge center and their managers on what that contribution will be. AMS holds an annual high-visibility invitation-only event for knowledge center contributors. Each knowledge center has an intranet location where AMS staff can find the center’s material. Knowledge centers are a way for AMS to encourage people to share knowledge about topics important to the organization.

SIGs, on the other hand, grow and disband continuously in response to special interests. They are loosely structured and there is no commitment required for membership. AMS holds two annual SIG idea-sharing meetings open to all, although many meet more frequently. Even though knowledge centers and SIGs have different levels of funding and focus, both build on the networks that already existed in AMS. Both enable people who were already sharing knowledge about a topic to reach more widely, engage more people in the discussion, and use better tools for finding and sharing ideas and insights.

Networks at Lotus, on the other hand, are formed on an *ad hoc* basis as people search and start Notes databases to find insights related to a problem, project or idea. There is no registration process and no sponsorship requirement, and a database assists communication for the community. While not formalized, several general rules do apply to most networks at Lotus. Networks are open and people tend to be very accepting of any interested participant. To build relationship within the network, Lotus requires all electronic contributions to be from an identified author. Successful networks do have clearly established goals and objectives. As Lotus became more aware of the strategic implications of sharing knowledge across teams, it built on them, enabling them with “moderators” to help grease the networking and improvements in the tools for sharing ideas with people you never met.

Human networks play a large role in PricewaterhouseCoopers's (PwC) strategy to leverage knowledge. PwC believes that knowledge sharing occurs in the interaction of people (with or without technology) and that networks are essential to it. PwC states that there are too many networks in the firm to count. While some networks in PwC are formally chartered, most are not. Membership is driven wholly by consultants' need to know about topics related to current projects and clients. PwC staff typically participate in about five networks. Networks at PwC begin in a variety of ways. In some cases, a partner brings in others from the same or different practice areas and he/she defines the objectives of the network. If funding is an issue, the partner requests funding from the firm. Most of the time, however, networks start when a PwC staff

member forms discussion groups on Lotus Notes and the firm's intranet, KnowledgeCurve. Typically they do not require funding. Networks can choose the type of communication they prefer. The knowledge management system at PwC provides a more sophisticated set of tools and a structure for funding and expanding the networks that already existed.

Even though AMS and PwC have some formal funded networks, they try to preserve the organic character of natural networks, letting people's interest drive the focus of the network and the urgency of its topic determine the networks' size. When you build on networks that already exist, you acknowledge that the company already does share knowledge and that expanding it is simply a natural step.

Behavior makes invisible values visible

Leaders and influential peers exert pressure to share

Linking these invisible values and visible elements of knowledge management is the behavior of peers and managers. In best practice companies, well-respected members of the organization model sharing knowledge. Best practice organizations report that people frequently seek information and insights outside their immediate workgroup or team and that their brightest people are generally their highest contributors.

At AMS the knowledge centers are led by a core group of recognized “world leading experts” on the topic. Their visible participation lends legitimacy to network. Senior managers who have expertise also make time to share their ideas and insights.

At Lotus, people are generally respected for *what* they know not *who* they know or *what* position they hold. When an individual shares knowledge at Lotus, he or she builds a brand-like identity for himself or herself. Since work at Lotus is frequently done in self-formed teams, having a good brand-identity is important to get chosen for interesting team projects. So participating in Lotus Notes discussions and making good contributions to them is key to keeping your identity visible.

At best practice companies, we found strong management support for sharing knowledge but the organizational level of that support varied greatly. When we first began

the study we thought strong senior management endorsement would be key to effective sharing. But we found that was only true where knowledge sharing was part of an overall corporate focus. At PWC, where sharing knowledge is part of their brand identity, senior managers do visibly support it, as PWC's numerous CKOs demonstrate. At AMS the Chairman of the Board and company founder personally invited people to head the knowledge centers. One expert who voiced some reluctance to lead a center received a call from the chairman of the board, now the Assistant Secretary of Defense, strongly encouraging him to accept the post. At Ford senior managers strongly supported Ford 2000.

But there were also several instances where knowledge sharing is led at a much lower level. At Lotus senior managers see their role as enabling, but not championing, initiatives. Sponsors of knowledge sharing at Lotus are at a lower, departmental level. At National Semiconductor, where sharing knowledge is folded into project performance, project managers are the strongest supporters.

Most importantly, people actively engaged in sharing knowledge have direct support from their immediate supervisor. Whether sharing knowledge is part of the business strategy, as at PwC and AMS or just part of how the company does business, as at Lotus, all the best practice companies said that unambiguous support from direct managers is an important enabler of knowledge sharing.

In all the best practice organizations, hoarding knowledge and failing to build on the ideas of others have visible and sometimes serious career consequences. These consequences can be in the form of a direct sanction from peers – “If you ask a question that is already in the database, you are likely to get flamed” – or a limit to your career. Because sharing knowledge is tied to a core value, an unwillingness to share is seen as more than just resistance to a new approach. It is seen as a direct violation of the core value to which knowledge sharing is linked.

Ford's knowledge-sharing tools and processes help reduce lag time and errors and thus improve project performance. So there is significant pressure from project members to share information. Ford also depends on the performance review process to raise awareness around the importance of sharing knowledge. During peer reviews, a key

question asked is “How well does ____ share?” If an employee is described as hard to work with, a poor team player, or a knowledge hoarder, they are referred to training to help them overcome these issues.

At Lotus people who ask questions that have already been answered are likely to be told where the answer can be found and advised in the future to check the database before asking another already answered question – a kind of mild “flaming”. Since people maintain “brand” visibility by sharing insights in Lotus Notes databases, it is hard to be disconnected for any length of time. So there are numerous stories of Lotus employees checking into the network to stay connected and visible while on vacation or even in their hospital beds.

At National Semiconductor, failing to share knowledge is also viewed as a strong negative, but for different reasons. One of the Analog Group's current strategic initiatives is to bring products to market in six months. Reusing code is one of the keys to achieving that goal. So there are strong pressures not to “reinvent the wheel” and learn from previous mistakes. As one NSC representative said, “Knowledge sharing lives inside of a business problem or strategic initiative. To do work today at NSC, an employee must share knowledge. Those that don't share don't get shared with, and they will quickly fall behind.”

Conclusion

We found that overcoming “cultural barriers” to sharing knowledge has more to do with how you design and implement your knowledge management effort than with changing your culture. It involves balancing the visible and invisible dimensions of culture; visibly demonstrating the importance of sharing knowledge and building on the invisible core values. The companies we studied felt they are still learning how to do this effectively. From their experience, we can derive five summary lessons about aligning knowledge sharing with the organization culture.

- (1) To create a knowledge sharing culture, make a visible connection between sharing knowledge and practical business goals, problems or results.
- (2) It is far more important to match the overall style of your organization than to

directly copy the practices developed by other organizations. To make sharing knowledge a natural step, think through how effective change happens in your organization. Make the visible artifacts of knowledge sharing – the events, language, Web sites – match the style of the organization, even if you intend to lead it into new behavior and approach.

- (3) Link sharing knowledge to widely held core values. Don't expect people to share their ideas and insights simply because it is the right thing to do. Appeal to something deeper. By linking with core values of the organization values, you make sharing knowledge consistent with peers' expectations and managers' considerations. Align your language, systems and approach with those values. The values you link to do not need to obviously support sharing knowledge, but people do need to genuinely believe in them. They cannot simply be the "espoused values" in the company's mission statement.
- (4) Human networks are one of the key vehicles for sharing knowledge. To build a sharing culture, enhance the networks that already exist. Enable them with tools, resources and legitimization.

- (5) Recruit the support of people in your organization who already share ideas and insights. Ask influential people and managers to encourage and even pressure people to share their knowledge. Build sharing knowledge into routine performance appraisal. Other people's behavior, like alignment with business results and core values, is a powerful determinant of one's own behavior.

Even when you plan to use sharing knowledge as a way to change the organization, our research suggests that the best strategy, ironically, is to first match the values and style of your organization. Don't start out a new campaign and new structures for sharing knowledge. Find the knowledge sharing networks that already exist and build on the energy they already have.

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