When Knowledge Sharing Works

I have been reading about the value of knowledge management for years. The underlying idea is an appealing one—not only do all of us collectively know more than any of us individually, but when we combine our knowledge, we can glean additional information not apparent to any of us.

So often, though, KM initiatives fail to take off, or at least fail to revolutionize the workplace in the ways promised by evangelists. My hunch has been that there have been two major stumbling blocks. The first is technological—a new software "solution" doesn't create knowledge sharing any more than a car can drive itself to the store to get a quart of milk. The second is sociological—information sharing is often not encouraged within organizations; in fact, there's often the unspoken belief that one loses power by sharing knowledge. Information hoarders are everywhere.

I was intrigued to read about a new initiative to share knowledge in what one would normally think of as the most hierarchical, least information-flat organization—the U.S. Army. But when you think about it, there is a tremendous need to share information learned in a combat situation among soldiers quickly, efficiently, and with little data loss. In the past, lessons learned in combat were sent to, yes, the Center for Army Lessons Learned, which compiled the information and sent out quarterly bulletins to soldiers. However, this up-the-ladder and down-the-ladder model was not agile enough for urban combat situations. Two majors developed an entirely new model for sharing knowledge, based on unmediated Web-based discussion forums. Now run under the auspices of West Point, CompanyCommand.com and PlatoonLeader.org are ultra-secure sites that provide vehicles for sharing information on everything from managing a pregnant subordinate to which sunglasses keep out wind and dust best.

While (luckily) most of us are never in a situation where we need advice on whether 9mm rounds are effective against the enemy, the ability to learn from peers and colleagues is as critical as ever. I started thinking of why CompanyCommand.com and PlatoonLeader.org were so successful and adopted so readily, particularly considering they were built initially as volunteer operations. They are great examples of word-of-mouth marketing as opposed to top-down distribution of Our New Way Of Sharing Information. They succeeded because they were unmediated, voluntary, and because the value of sharing information was immediately clear to each participant. ("Sheesh, he just found out that they're wiring grenades behind posters of Moqtada al-Sadr, knowing that we'll be going around tearing down the posters.")

We info pros see the need for gathering institutional knowledge and making it accessible to others within our organization, but sometimes we get caught in the trap of thinking we need to organize it, too. Perhaps the best approach we can take to facilitating information sharing is to address the WIIFM (What's In It For Me?) issue, create a "home" that is compelling, and then sit back and watch it happen. Understand that things will be a bit chaotic, a bit unorganized, and some of the information that appears may not be 100% accurate. Just like the Web.

Granted, it is harder to address the WIIFM proposition when users aren't compelled by dire consequences, although I recall frantic calls from salespeople back in my days as a special librarian, where it sure sounded like a sales guy was going to die if I couldn't get him info on a client in five minutes or less. But the more we can build something that is clearly *by* as well as *for* our client base, the more readily the resource or tool will be adopted.

Plenty has been written about the use of wikis as a collaboration tool, although the format is not the most conducive to encouraging the give-and-take of a true virtual community. And blogs, while they are a tremendous medium for broadcasting information using both push (RSS feed) and pull (blog site) technology, are not designed for two-way communication. Yes, you can enable the comments feature, but somehow, a comment to a post does not have the same weight as the blog entry itself.

In fact, the best example of information sharing that I have seen is one that has been around for 20 years: The Well (www.well.com). To call it an online bulletin board vastly understates its value; it's truly a community, with its rough neighborhoods, warm and fuzzy cafés, corner bars, and the occasional crank. People have met their spouses there; we have mourned the death of Wellpern (people on The Well) we have known and loved. What makes it work is that it is built entirely by its members, and all members' postings are "signed"—no anonymous drive-by

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assaults. There is very little moderating needed; the subscribers really do feel that this is their community. This is the kind of knowledge management system that people would fight to belong on. Try it out and see if it would work for your organization. ◼

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