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My mind is made up. Don't confuse me with the facts.

In reflecting on economic climes and turbulent times, and contemplating topics that might be of value in this context, we decided on a potentially provocative topic - that of knowledge sharing in organisations... or the lack thereof?

The term 'knowledge management' has been tossed around in the business world for some fifteen years or more yet the vast majority of us are no closer to understanding what it means, let alone creating the sorts of systems and processes that give it life in our organisations. We are talking here, not of the vast interconnected information repositories found in many large consulting and legal firms, but of knowledge sharing as an integral part of organisational culture.

We are experiencing what might become the worst global recession since the Great Depression, thousands of people are losing their jobs and organisations are making decisions that will have long-term impact, sometimes too quickly and often with too little information. It seems critical to explore the whys and wherefores of these decisions, so let's think about:

- **How we choose who goes and who stays.** Is it first in first out, or last in first out? Do we identify critical operations and roles and do away with the nice-to-haves? How do we *know* it's a nice-to-have rather than a need-to-have? Do we select top performers and key talent, and cut down the "deadwood"? Or do we do something a bit different and negotiate a pay cut for all staff so that all can stay? How do we define, identify, measure and evaluate these people and functions?
- **The decision makers.** Who are they and how do they know they've got it right?
- **The information used for decision making.** Where does it come from? How much of it is coloured with the hue and tint of individual perception? After all one person's deadwood is another's family dining table, an organisation's boardroom table, a furniture designer's inspiration source and a manufacturer's life blood.

As career transition consultants, executive coaches, and promoters of organisational learning and development, we think these are important questions. Edward Scissorhands had a kind and caring soul but was not always in control of his cutting ways. **Are we?**

Technology is ubiquitous, relatively inexpensive, and quite often today, user driven. The databases, discussion groups and forums - early knowledge sharing vehicles that began with systems like Lotus Notes and became more prevalent with Web technology (internet, intranets, extranets), have now morphed with the emergence of Web 2.0 into networks like LinkedIn and Facebook, and blogs and wikis which can be initiated and populated by anyone with sufficient interest and motivation.

Technology has the potential to be both an enabler and an inhibitor of knowledge sharing in organisations. Many organisations have HR information systems which document policies and procedures, staff position descriptions, performance evaluation methodologies and the like. These more formal systems may not be used (or indeed be accessible) outside of HR, and do not present many opportunities for informal and relatively unstructured knowledge sharing - unlike organisational blogs or wikis, even twitter, that replicate conversations around the coffee machine or watercooler, facilitate the exchange of stories, of lessons learned, successes and failures, individual skills and training, people and connections, i.e. who knows what and who knows who.

So... does your organisation have a *Who's Who in OurCo*? Have you seen Dead Wood's resume? Do you know something about his/her qualifications, experience and career achievements? Have you seen a position description, and is it current? Do you understand what they do, and how they do it? What do you know of their skills and capabilities? Do you have a sense of where they fit in your organisation, as opposed to where they sit? Have you sought feedback, and if so how well have you listened? When you walk them out the door, do you know what's going with them? Have you done a cost-benefit analysis or just drawn a line through the cost? And will the cost of replacing them be greater than the cost of retaining them?

Harvard Business Review this month carries an interactive case study on "Layoffs" and a separate article discusses the Act-Learn-Act-Learn approach, commenting that "Leaders are taught that when they encounter problems, they should implement solutions. But... many so-called solutions fail to work. That's because problems can be harder to solve than they look.... Instead of trying to crack the case... look for ways to work the problem."



Ways to work the problem can be collaborative and transparent, drawing on shared organisational knowledge, experience, ideas and feedback, so potential solutions are given a rigorous workout before implementation, and organisational knowledge, culture and reputation remains resilient and regenerative even in times of turmoil. And involving staff in important problem-solving activity, especially where there is a collaborative/shared component to the issue, is one of the best ways of building motivation and cohesiveness. Critical for retention: very important for attraction.



"Knowledge comes from unexpected sources in unexpected sequences, and grows in the course of interaction." [Stephen Denning]

Through My Eyes: a story of organisational change through the eyes of different participants

The Career Transition Consultant

My client had briefed me well on the employees they would be exiting today. There were four people leaving, all from the same team, and they had been expecting the news for some time. Nonetheless, the impact of facing the reality of their roles being made redundant could never be under-estimated and I was totally prepared, having been in this business for many years.

The first two people I met with were upset but handling the news professionally. Their biggest concern was the economic downturn and how long it would take them to find their next job. I agreed that the global financial crisis was making it more challenging for people to find work, but that businesses were still hiring. It is important right now to be as well-prepared and competitive in job search strategies as possible, and to develop good skills in connecting to the hidden job market. We worked out a short term plan to help them get back in control of events, and agreed to follow up tomorrow.

The third person was more challenging. After we introduced ourselves and I asked a few questions about how the news had impacted her, I could feel myself being drawn in to her story. It was as if I was listening to someone telling the story of **my** life. As we spoke together, the empathy and sadness became almost overwhelming and it took all of my mental and emotional energy to stay focused on **her**, to push away the memories and the emotions they evoked in me. As a professional I had found myself in similar situations only once or twice before but never as profoundly as today.

The meeting concluded with her smiling and laughing and looking forward to starting her career transition with our company. Her response reassured my inner mentor that I had handled the situation well in spite of myself.

The fourth and final meeting ended on a positive note. The individual was celebrating the fact that she could now retire and travel with her husband. This was truly a good news story!

As I was driving back to the office, I reflected on the third person I had met, and the parallels between our lives. I mentally reviewed my management of the situation to ensure I hadn't let anything show other than professional interest and empathy. And then I allowed myself a teeny moment of self-indulgent sadness before putting on my suit of armor and returning to the office.

