Chapter 3
MANAGING KNOWLEDGE

Communication in this study is viewed not as an end in itself. It is considered as a means or instrument to achieve the desired goals of the organisation. Besides the cultural dimensions of communication, this study focuses on how communication activities are practised particularly in the light of a knowledge management perspective, which has a strong bearing on KRL's attempt to be a learning organisation. This chapter discusses the theoretical background of the various dimensions of the emerging subject of knowledge management.

3.1 Knowledge in Organisations

As Johnston and Carrico (1988) argue, "knowledge bases" are critical to organisational competitiveness. Knowledge bases or organisational memories are both the collective knowledge of groups and individuals within an organisation and the strategies which guide the interpretation of situations and environmental cues. Thus, while individuals come and go, according to Daft & Weick, (1984), "organisations preserve knowledge, behaviours, mental maps, norms and values over time", and it is these cognitive systems and memories which enable members of organisations to "interpret as a system".

An organisation's ability to learn about its internal and external environments is a key determinant of its likelihood of achieving competence. In other words, organisational learning is a by-product of environmental scanning and
information gathering, the ability of organisational members to translate information into shared forms of meaning, and the capacity of the organisation to interpret feedback associated with actions.

Organisations need to know what their knowledge assets are. They are nothing but knowledge about markets (including competition), products, processes and technologies. Knowledge about each of these is an important asset that contributes towards the successful functioning of any organisation. In addition to having these assets, it is important for an organisation to know how to manage them to get maximum returns.

Knowledge management entails not only managing the knowledge assets, but also the processes that act on them. The key processes associated with these assets are: knowledge generation, knowledge storage and knowledge utilisation.

These processes follow a spiral path. Once existing knowledge is preserved (stored), and used (disseminated and shared), one gets into the next phase of enhancing knowledge and acquiring new knowledge.

Knowledge generation comprises of knowledge acquisition, knowledge synthesis and knowledge creation. ‘Knowledge acquisition’ is the process of acquiring knowledge that is available somewhere. For an organisation this could mean capturing knowledge from existing documents or capturing tacit knowledge of its people into the organisational repositories. It could also mean identifying external sources of either process or technology expertise or market intelligence so
that this knowledge can be purchased. Sometimes this means recruiting the services of known experts or even acquisition of another organisation known to possess that knowledge.

According to Nonaka, (1994), 'knowledge synthesis' is the process of putting either different kinds of information or people together to be able to come up with new patterns and ideas. It enables a new approach or understanding to evolve from already available pockets of information or expertise, merely on account of the fact that they are being made to interact differently or are being viewed in a different way. 'Knowledge creation' is often considered synonymous with 'knowledge generation'. But knowledge generation includes knowledge creation though it is only one component. Knowledge is created by individuals. An organisation cannot create knowledge without individuals. The organisation supports creative individuals or provides a context for such individuals to create knowledge.4

For a better understanding of knowledge management in relation to communication it is important to discuss the various components of knowledge like data, information and wisdom.

3.2 The DIKW Quartet

Data, information, knowledge and wisdom are all inter-connected terms. ‘Data’ is discrete content and does not make much sense by itself. ‘Information’ is processed and collated data.
"Knowledge", according to Natarajan & Shekhar, (2000) is highly contextualised information enriched with individual interpretation and expertise. In the organisational context, knowledge can also be looked at as information which is tested against the business rules of the organisation and found to be valid by knowledgeable individuals and is therefore elevated to a level of validated information or knowledge.

"Wisdom" is in a different realm with profundity born out of intuition and deep insight being the pre-requisites. This cannot be 'managed', though data, information and knowledge can be managed. The information and knowledge entities are often misunderstood and used interchangeably. Many organisations attempting on knowledge management solution often find it difficult to differentiate information and knowledge. While information can be independent, knowledge is highly person specific. Knowledge is always contextual and it can never be interpreted or used without understanding its context.5

According to Brown (1999) information is fundamentally dis-embeddable and therefore transportable and re-embeddable, knowledge is not. Knowledge lives in its context. Hence it is possible to dissemble information from one place and use it elsewhere. But it would not be possible to dissemble a piece of knowledge unless it is lifted with its entire context intact.6
3.3 Knowledge Management Principles

Knowledge management encompasses any processes and practices concerned with the creation, capture, sharing and use of knowledge, skills and expertise, according to Quintas et al (1997). It is about harnessing the intellectual capital of an organisation, recognising that knowledge, not simply information, is the primary asset of an organisation. It includes processes and procedures concerned with the utilisation and development of knowledge, skills and expertise, whether these are explicitly labelled KM or not.7

When we speak of knowledge we mean explicit knowledge as well as tacit knowledge, in an organisational context.

3.4 Explicit and Tacit

Explicit knowledge can be articulated in formal language and transmitted through, manuals and written specifications. Tacit knowledge is seen as personal knowledge, based on individual experience and values and therefore not as easily transmitted. However, once the sharing of tacit knowledge has become part of the corporate culture, and has been harnessed accordingly, it will not be lost to the organisation if a particular individual moves on. By then it will have become embedded in the organisation.

It is important to note that much of an organisation's knowledge is personal, that is embedded in the abilities or skills of employees. Hence the organisation is vulnerable to losing that knowledge if the individual chooses to leave. The solution
is then to capture and store that knowledge so that it becomes the 'intellectual property' of the organisation rather than of the individual.

Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) states that while Western companies focus on information-processing of formal, codified knowledge, Japanese companies succeed because they understand the significance of tacit, subjective knowledge.

Organisational learning is not a random process. Removing the organisational obstacles to learning is closely linked to the strategic priorities of the human resource functions.

3.5 Learning Systems

The learning organisations can be distinguished by their flatter organisation structures and de-centralised decision-making processes. Hence according to Pan (1999) managing these organisations is difficult from managing traditional hierarchical organisations. At its core lies a particular knowledge-intensive thinking which concentrates specifically on intellect and reflection. Processes of learning and KM are integrated into the fabric of the organisation, thus requiring a conceptual shift away from the traditional view of the firm.

In this context, traditional managerial activities which focus on the improvement of human relations, communication, group and team processes, performance evaluation and improvement, now take on new interpretations and meanings, thereby re-conceptualising the role of management.
3.6 Knowledge-based Culture

Bureaucracy no longer works in a modern organisation. The present day challenges call for lively and intelligent organisations. Bureaucracy does not work well because its rules and procedures are often diametrically opposed to the principles needed for workers to take the next step toward greater organisational intelligence. Such principles include more responsibility to define and direct one’s own job, more responsibility to co-ordinate with others, and a shift in authority from one’s boss to one’s customers.

Gifford and Elizabeth Pinchot (1996) have identified the shift from the bureaucratic nature of work and the knowledge-based one. Accordingly the unskilled work changes to knowledge work, meaningless repetitive task changes to innovation and caring individual work to team work functional-based work to project based work and single skilled work to multiskilled work. The power of bosses changes to power of customers and the co-ordination from above changes to co-ordination among peers. 10

3.7 Knowledge Work

According to Drucker (1993), more and more work, both technical and non-technical, is knowledge-based. We no longer need many unskilled assembly-line workers; most of the jobs in factories involve technical knowledge and training. What is more, few jobs in a manufacturing organisation are in the factory. Most ‘manufacturing’ jobs are in functions such as marketing, design, process
engineering, technical analysis, accounting and management, which require professional expertise and mastery of a large body of knowledge. This same trend toward more knowledge workers is present in service industries, non-profit organisations and government. Drucker estimates that one-third of all jobs are already filled by the highly paid and productive group he calls knowledge workers.\footnote{11}

The very nature of knowledge work, which involves information gathering, imagination, experiment, discovery, and integration of new knowledge with larger systems, means that bosses cannot order about knowledge workers. If knowledge workers are any good at all, they soon learn more about what they are doing on a specific project than their boss.

Knowledge work inherently has a large component of self-direction and teamwork and is hampered by remote control from distant bosses. As we move beyond bureaucracy we find ways to organise so that all work is knowledge work, bringing everyone's native intelligence and collaborative abilities to bear on constantly changing ways of achieving shared goals.

The mindless repetitive jobs that bureaucracies were designed to manage are rapidly changing. Machines do more of the routine work, and the work that is left requires initiative and flexibility. Hence the job of leaders is more in bringing out people's talents around a common vision. Moreover people are much better
than machines at innovating, at seeing new possibilities within fluid and imperfectly designed systems and knowing what to do.

Another irreplaceable human talent is caring. As more and more work becomes service, caring about and for others becomes increasingly important. Against this, the rules of bureaucracy forbid caring and acting on the basis of the inner values one holds rather than out of strict obedience and loyalty to the boss. Yet another dimension is that caring, like innovation, must come from the inside. We cannot order people to innovate or to care. Creativity and connecting with others require engaged relationships, personal responsibility, and flexible thinking and acting.

3.8 Team Work

Organisations become more intelligent when they find ways to bring the intelligence of every member into supporting the purpose and goals of the organisation. Most of the recent management innovations rely on the power of teams. Total quality management, quality circles and benchmarking all give emphasis on teamwork. Such restructuring activities of the organisation like business process reengineering and enterprise resource planning requires that employees work as functional teams.

3.9 Project Work

As the knowledge workers shift from static jobs to solving a series of problems or seizing opportunities, they do so in work organised as projects. In this
complex world each project generally requires a cross-disciplinary team. These teams then learn together as the project evolves. Control, then, shifts from the functional organisation of bureaucracy to project teams.

However, specialisation will continue to be a crucial part of every complex organisation. But because of the interconnections of issues more and more work involve integrating the viewpoints and activities of specialist, and less and less are performing tasks completely within these specialities. As a result, each employee will have to be both a specialist and a generalist.

In an ‘intelligent organisation’, participation is widespread to help expose all the issues as early as possible. Individuals with multiple skills are brought together to cover more viewpoints in a team of manageable size, and the team does its work guided by feedback, not commands.

3.10 Multi-skilled Work

In a bureaucratic system employees are single skilled. If someone falls sick, another identical worker needs to be waiting to do the job. This system is expensive and inflexible. In a multi-skilled workforce, when bottlenecks appear, whether through absenteeism or a sudden rush to one kind of work, someone can step in and get things moving. Denton (1992) points out that many companies have improved morale, speed and efficiency by loosening job classifications and developing a broader more flexible workforce through cross-training employees. 12
3.11 Power of Customers

For an organisation to be responsive, customers' wishes have to have a strong influence on the people doing the work. Relying on this sort of information through bosses is too slow. Besides, they may not be there to hear what customers want. This applies to internal customers, like employees within an organisation, or users of a unit's output as much as external customers. In a rapidly changing world, if internal customers cannot get what they need promptly, the system will not be able to serve external clients promptly and flexibly.

3.12 Co-ordination among Peers

In a bureaucratic system, employees are not responsible for co-ordinating their work with others at their level. That is their boss's job. When co-ordination is the boss's job, cross-functional, or horizontal, communication with one's peers is frowned upon as either a waste of time or a usurpation of the boss's authority.

One important pre-requisite for an organisation to become a learning organisation is the culture of innovation among the people within. In KRL some aspects of communication have a bearing on creating an environment for innovation. Hence it is important to discuss what innovation is and the different facets of the innovation process.
3.13 Innovative Culture

Innovation is the creation and exploitation of new ideas. Kanter (1985) states that whether technological or administrative, whether in products, processes or systems, innovation tends to have four distinctive characteristics.

i. The innovation process is uncertain. The source of innovation or the occurrence of opportunity to innovate may be unpredictable. The innovation goal may involve little or no precedent or experience base to make forecasts about results.

ii. The innovation process is knowledge-intensive. The innovation process generates new knowledge intensively, relying on individual human intelligence and creativity and involving "interactive learning". New experiences are accumulated at a fast pace. The knowledge that resides in the participants in the innovation effort is not yet codified or codifiable for transfer to others. Also, there need to be close linkages and fast communication between all those involved, at every point in the process, or the knowledge erodes.

iii. The innovation process is controversial. Innovations always involve competition with alternative courses of action. Sometimes the very existence of a potential innovation poses a threat to vested interests.

iv. The innovation process crosses boundaries. An innovation process cannot normally be contained solely within one unit. Many of the best ideas are interdisciplinary or interfunctional in origin, or they benefit from broader perspective and information from outside of the area primarily responsible for the innovation.
Also regardless of the origin of innovations they inevitably send out ripples and reverberations to other organisational units, whose behaviour may be required to change in the light of needs of innovations, or whose cooperation is necessary if an innovation is to be fully developed or exploited.\textsuperscript{13}

Open communication serves a very important function for the potential innovator. Information and ideas flow freely and wherever accessible. Technical data and alternative points of view can be gathered with greater ease than in companies without these norms and systems. Innovation flourishes where communication density as well as communication integration are high. Open communication patterns make it easier to identify and contact potential coalition members and to tap their expertise.

Network density is also another factor facilitating innovation. Once communication networks are facilitated people can draw on first-hand knowledge of each other in seeking support.

Innovation stems from individual talent and creativity. But whether or not individual skills are activated, exercised, supported and channelled into the production of a new model that can be used, is a function of the organisational and inter-organisational context.

3.14 KM Practice

Increasingly, companies are seeking to implement KM projects in the hope of transforming themselves into learning organisations.
In a world of exponentially shortening product and service life cycles, the greatest challenge facing any company is its ability to continuously anticipate opportunities and threats, convert threats into opportunities, and to raise corporate value by translating every opportunity to a profitable line of business. This requires a corporation to perennially innovate, redefine and recreate itself. It occurs when organisations actively seek, encourage and reward knowledge, irrespective of hierarchy.

However, most of the companies seem to focus on information technology based tools for knowledge management. If not close attention is also paid to people management and organisational processes in knowledge management initiatives, such experiments are likely to fail. Where processes of people management are neglected, the practice of knowledge management is dogged with difficult, persistent and sometimes fatal problems.

Goswami (2000) says, leveraging intellectual capital for growth is easy to talk of, but very hard to achieve. Even though it is a fact that knowledge reposes in people and not in electronic networks few Indian companies understand this. Regarding the method of managing people in an organisation often age of the person or his position in the hierarchy are mistaken as knowledge and wisdom.¹⁴

In this context it is to be remembered that KM is not another managerial jargon which comes and goes fast. To a growing number of companies, KM is more than just a buzzword or a sales pitch, it is an approach to adding or creating
value by more actively leveraging the how, experience, and judgement resident within and, in many cases, outside of an organisation. It has to be remembered that it is a dangerous thing to think that one knows everything.

There can be a few simple tests to know the level of knowledge management in an organisation, by asking these questions: Can the organisation transfer knowledge easily to new employees? Is it an information/knowledge sharing culture? Does the organisation know what and where its knowledge assets are? Is knowledge organised and easy to find? Does the organisation capture and share best practices? Does it learn from mistakes? Does it reward knowledge-sharing? Are the employees exploiting knowledge effectively and strategically? Does the knowledge walk out of the door as staff leave?

Knowledge management and more specifically knowledge sharing is extremely dependent on the organisational ethos. However, implementation cannot be an open ended exercise whose fate is determined by the employees. For any initiative to get institutionalised, it needs to be supported by clearly defined processes, individual responsibilities and technological enablers.

Before going into the process of communication in KRL it is important to study the functioning of the organisation, its systems and practices, so also the socio-economic scenario in which it functions.
References


