

Can knowledge management really change organisational culture?

The old saying, knowledge is power, has been shown to have real effect when looking at organisations. Research just published in the *Journal of Knowledge Management* shows that the discipline of knowledge management (KM) can help to bring about changes in organisational culture.



Principles of knowledge management

People often perceive that knowledge management in organisations has to occur through complex and expensive software. Whilst this can be the case, there are many other ways of developing a knowledge management programme. All knowledge management is a structured approach to capturing, developing, sharing and effectively using organisational knowledge and practice.

Knowledge management examples

Examples include

- Knowledge Sharing (fostering a culture that encourages the sharing of information, based on the concept that knowledge is not irrevocable and should be shared and updated to remain relevant)
- Storytelling (as a means of transferring tacit knowledge)
- Debriefing
- After event reviews
- Communities of practice
- Expert directories (to enable knowledge seeker to reach to the experts)
- Knowledge fairs
- Work practice poster sessions
- Wikis
- Blogs etc.

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The research in question was an eight-year longitudinal study that followed three organisations based in the UK but with offices abroad. The authors note that there is no ‘magic bullet solution’ to organisational change. They do point out that this research follows a number of similar studies in a number of sectors that show it is possible to promote culture change using knowledge management programmes.

6 key findings

The six key findings from the study are:

1. Leaders can use knowledge management programmes and tools to promote a specific culture change, but this requires persistence, as well as the use of a wide variety of tools and approaches, backed by a clear and sustained vision and rationale.
2. It is important to promote knowledge management and support the people who have the right attitudes and aptitude to act as champions across the organisation. This helps to enhance local adoption of knowledge management as a tool.
3. Technology seduction (popular software tools) can support culture adaptation but the researchers found this approach will not work in isolation. Software and technology based methods must be accompanied by training and the promotion of related activity to ensure that people can absorb the new behaviours into everyday work practices.
4. One problem is that knowledge management programmes on their own often promote simplistic notions of culture change. It is important to remove barriers to improved performance and think about how to change long-term assumptions, approaches and norms. Knowledge management on its own rarely does this.
5. If the organisational culture is identified as needing to be changed, an assessment of what those cultural aspects are that need change is important, as is an understanding of why it is no longer appropriate. This can be part of the knowledge management programme.
6. The use of short-term activities and exhortation to alter deep-seated values and assumptions does not work and is often counter-productive.

Conclusions



The research essentially says that where the culture is open to new ways of working, knowledge management can facilitate change. One of the biggest obstacles is where management opposes it to retain power in their fiefdoms. This is where the authors felt that “The rhetoric was stronger than the practical support for the knowledge

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management teams, when structural change was required.” As such, where knowledge management is seen as a threat, management will oppose that change and it will not occur.

Again this highlights the strategic role of management in any change event.



Change is necessary in order for any organisation to adapt to the environment around it. Any knowledge management programme should include substantive elements whereby people are required to identify and understand the environment within which the organisation works. This will help to ensure that the organisation changes to suit the new environment as opposed to change and hope for the best. Knowledge management can thus be responsive to the world outside and to that extent knowledge management gives any organisation the ability to respond to outside factors. No person is an island – nor can an organisation work in isolation!

Reference

Corfield, Alison, and Rob Paton. "Investigating Knowledge Management: Can KM Really Change Organisational Culture?." *Journal of Knowledge Management* 20.1 (2016).

Link to paper: <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1108/JKM-12-2014-0502>