

# Knowledge and Tragedy: or why we shouldn't share knowledge

By Patrick Lambe

When Julius Caesar walked into the Forum in Rome on that fateful March day in 44 BC, he was hard pressed by petitioners. Caesar was not in Rome often: he had spent much of the previous fourteen years enlarging the dominions of Rome, fighting a bitter civil war against those who thought him too powerful, and flirting with Cleopatra in Egypt. And he was about to head east, to Parthia, to fight another war. A lot of people wanted his attention before he left.

One of the crowd was a philosophy teacher named Artemidorus. He knew of the plot to assassinate Caesar that very day, and had written the details of the plan and the names of the key conspirators onto a folded piece of papyrus. However, he noticed that whenever Caesar accepted a piece of paper from his petitioners, he handed it immediately, as all great men do, to one of his aides. Artemidorus came close, and as he handed over the papyrus, pleaded: "Read this one, Caesar, read it quickly and by yourself. I promise you it's important and concerns you personally."

Devotees of just-in-time knowledge management would be pleased. The conspirators were already waiting inside the meeting hall with concealed knives. In fact, knowledge of the plot had started to leak out more widely. At Caesar's home, one of Caesar's servants, who had also discovered the plot, but who did not know when or how it was to be accomplished, was sitting by the entrance waiting for Caesar's return, in order to warn him.

Several times, Caesar appeared to be on the brink of opening the letter, but each time he was distracted. At length, already delayed, he walked into the meeting hall to begin his session with the Senate. The tragedy did not take long to unfold. As Caesar sat on his chair, the Senators gathered around him. One of them, Tillius Cimber, grabbed a length of Caesar's toga and dropped to the ground like a suppliant, pulling the toga downwards. Held tight, it prevented Caesar from rising or using his hands, and it exposed his neck to his enemies. "What are you waiting for?" he cried to the others.

The conspirators were now committed. They pulled out their knives and started to slash and stab at Caesar, who struggled like a bear to his feet, then fell to the ground, twisting wildly to escape the blows. As he became weaker, he simply curled up, wrapped in his toga, as the Senators continued to hack at him. At the foot of his chair, the unopened note from Artemidorus. Just-in-time knowledge wasn't quite enough.

If we were relieved when Artemidorus turned up with the warning note, we were going as far as most knowledge management goes: getting the infrastructure in place to deliver the right knowledge to the right desktop in time for it to be used. But as we saw with

Caesar's unopened letter, it's not the whole story. Just getting the knowledge to the right person in time isn't enough. We also have to ensure that the recipient is capable of opening up the knowledge, understanding and using it appropriately, and that they have the resources to do so.

Knowledge management can't stop at the desktop – in fact, the greater part of knowledge management lies not in information delivery (where we pay the most attention), but in the knowledge interpretation and deployment skills of our knowledge workers, and in the creation of space and time for them to deploy knowledge effectively (the parts where we pay least attention).

### **Asymmetries of Knowledge**

But there's a deeper lesson in the story of Caesar's letter, and that is the lesson that tragedy itself has to teach us. Let's imagine, for a moment, that the protagonists of Shakespeare's four great tragedies, Julius Caesar, Othello, Hamlet and King Lear, all had the benefits of perfect knowledge management. Pretty quickly, we realise that we wouldn't have had any tragedies at all, and our friend William Shakespeare would have had to find a different career.

Julius Caesar would have had ample warning of the plot and evaded it. Othello would have realised that Iago's misinformation about his new bride Desdemona was treacherous and malign; Desdemona would not have been cruelly killed. Hamlet spends much of the play pretending he doesn't know that his uncle murdered his father the King of Denmark, and then reveals it in a play performed at court. Once the tyrant knows that Hamlet knows, there is a whole chain of further murders, accidents and suicides. Good knowledge management would have ensured that Hamlet could have been bumped off much earlier, and everybody else in the play wouldn't have had to die quite so messily. King Lear would have known that his only faithful daughter was Cordelia, the one whom he rejected because she failed to flatter him. With perfect knowledge management, he would never have had his eyes torn out, or gone mad.

Knowledge, lack of knowledge, disguise, conspiracy, forgery, misunderstandings, treachery and betrayal, drive the plots of tragedy forward. Sometimes the protagonists confide in us, the audience, in much the same way as historians of disasters do, and knowing what we know, we watch with bated breath, as the plots drive inexorably towards doom.

Asymmetries of knowledge – some people knowing things that other people don't know – drive plots forward. They are important not just in tragedy. Comedies also rely on misunderstandings, disguises, deception and ignorance of what's really going on. In a competitive world, these asymmetries are incredibly important. But it's the exact opposite of a tragedy that concerns most business organizations – the triumph. And here knowledge asymmetries rule supreme.

The triumph is what we all seek, be it large or small. Triumphs drive the plot of our lives forward, give us goals to aim for, both personal and corporate. We want to succeed, and we want to succeed in competition with others, whether that competition is acknowledged or unacknowledged. And perfect knowledge management, like the perfect marketplace, actually removes the sense and the momentum of this drive towards success. Because in order to succeed, we need to know things that our competitors don't know. We need imperfect knowledge to exist.

It doesn't really matter whether the competitors are actually competitors for resources or influence within our own organization, or whether they are competing organizations out there in the marketplace. The basic rule remains the same. Knowledge really is power, and it can only be shared if sharing it moves the plot forward towards triumph and away from tragedy.

That tacit doctrine, preached so often and so unthinkingly, that indiscriminate knowledge sharing benefits everybody, is simply naïve – or it is deliberately deceitful. Successful knowledge management in the real world is not about indiscriminate knowledge sharing at all: it's far more about knowing what to share and when and with whom, what to keep secret, and what to reveal, whom to trust, and whom to avoid.

### **Knowledge Secrecy**

Let's look at a few examples to make this very clear. A friend of a friend, Allan Tang, has just set up a food business based on quail products with some partners, named, appropriately, House of Quail. They have a stall at Pasir Panjang Food Centre, but they also distribute raw and marinated quails island-wide. If you go to their website at [houseofquail.com](http://houseofquail.com), you'll find that they want to share a lot of knowledge about quails: their nutritional qualities, recipes, cooking instructions, and so on. It's in their interest to do so. The more good stuff you know about their product, as a customer, the more likely you are to buy it.

But there are a few pieces of knowledge that comprise the true intellectual capital of their business. This is the knowledge they don't want to share – would be foolish to share, in fact. The recipes they use at their food stall, for example. They are old family recipes, redesigned by experimentation, trial and error, for their food stall. And they don't want to share knowledge about their privileged source of high quality quail, either. "It took a lot of effort to find a good supplier, and we want this product to remain unique" says one of the partners. "You have to be quite resourceful to acquire this knowledge. We used our personal networks, our instinct, and our knowledge of different information sources. So long as we are the only ones who know where to get the best quail, we have an advantage." In small businesses such secrets can literally make the difference between triumph or tragedy.

A less positive, but no less uncommon example, comes from a small business of another friend of mine, which will remain nameless for obvious reasons. It's a small importing business: the goods are manufactured to order in China, and sold through large

distributors in Singapore. The company employs about 20 people, half of them in sales, and half in warehousing and administration. Recently, they started a new activity, exporting into the United States.

The warehouse manager is a shareholder, but my friend complains that he's inefficient. "He has no idea of the proper way of doing things, he's always doing it his own way, and that means we can't keep track of what's going on. But he also refuses to train anybody else up in the warehouse, or let us know how his system works. He wants to be in control of everything. So we get good people coming in, and they try to organize stuff, but he just shuts them out, criticizes them and gives them meaningless stuff to do. In the end he drives them away. If he wasn't a shareholder, we'd probably fire him."

My friend's puzzle is how to keep the good people (whom he has no difficulty in recruiting) and disempower the bad people so they can do less harm. But from our perspective, the story of weak or insecure performers who use secrecy and avoidance to keep their hold on power and keep their ineffectiveness from becoming visible, is one we too rarely admit to, but too often meet.

And finally, on the other side of the coin, is the star performer who also, for whatever reason, feels under threat, and sees his knowledge as the sole remaining card in the pack.

Another friend of mine was a senior executive in a large Singaporean company. His company was the subject of a takeover, and he watched one by one as his colleagues on the old senior management team were systematically moved, marginalised, or dismissed, and as the new blood came in from the parent company. A year in, and he was the only survivor of the old team. "How can knowledge management help a company like ours?" he used to ask. "Take my example: here I am, I'm running a business that depends on all my contacts and relationships, and my ability to swing a deal. If you take me away, you take my knowledge from the company. How can knowledge management help preserve that knowledge for the company so that I'm not indispensable?"

In retrospect, I'm not sure that he really wanted to know how knowledge management could help his company. I think he probably wanted reassurance that the kind of knowledge he possessed was not so easily acquired by his employer, and that he would not so easily become dispensable. This is not a small anxiety for a man in his early fifties. In fact, the answer to such questions is simply time. If newer, cheaper and more malleable executives work for long enough with the target of the desired knowledge, eventually they will acquire enough confidence to cut the umbilical cord. They'll never do the same job as my friend, but they'll muddle through and learn their own way to success once they've got the basics. The business will survive.

Almost two years in, my friend finally left for another job; probably, I suspect, because he felt his borrowed time was running out. I don't believe he deliberately kept his knowledge secret to protect himself as the warehouse manager did. But I do think the difficulty of sharing his experience and expertise-based knowledge, bought him some time, and enabled him to get a little more control over his own destiny.

We are hopelessly unsophisticated in our approaches to knowledge management. We believe, for example, that we are managing knowledge if we manage to get the right information to the right desktop at the right time, and we spend a lot of money on acquiring the ability to do that. We assume, naïvely, that only the corporate plot and its aspiration towards triumph matters when it comes to knowledge asymmetries, and that everybody will share knowledge willingly once they understand what the corporate plot is. We forget that individuals and small groups also have smaller plots, smaller tragedies and triumphs, and their own unique aspirations. And they will also use knowledge asymmetries to drive themselves towards success, regardless of what the bigger, more impersonal plots of our superiors dictate.

Caesar's unopened letter therefore teaches us three things. First, it's not enough to simply deliver the knowledge, important though that is. The key is whether knowledge is, or can be, acted upon. That means far more emphasis on helping our people become skilled knowledge users.

Second, we don't have to have perfect knowledge management, nor would we particularly enjoy it. In a competitive world, we simply have to be better at managing knowledge asymmetries than our current competitors are. As it turns out, that also means a greater emphasis on skills: building the experience, intuition and resourcefulness of our knowledge workers.

Finally, we need to recognise that the corporate plot occupies only a part of most people's lives. Knowledge sharing and knowledge secrecy also operate in our personal trajectories through life. When the two conflict, when my interest appears to be compromised by the dictates of my masters, then I will deploy my knowledge asymmetries first in my own defence – if not actively, at least passively. And unless our interests are selfish and cruel, it is right that we should do so.

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