

Getting and Sustaining Buy-in for Knowledge Management: Notes from a Knowledge Café at KM World 2015, Washington DC.

This is a summary of contributions by participants in three rounds of Knowledge Café discussions at KM World on November 5 2015, and facilitated by Patrick Lambe. We'd like to thank the 25 KM professionals who shared their challenges, experience and advice so generously.

Challenges: Lack of experience

Many knowledge managers are teleported into their role from another discipline, eg IT, librarianship, organizational excellence, HR etc. They may have no idea of knowledge management, or they may have read up on the books and guides, but have no idea how to apply these ideas in practice. They have a lack of experience in KM, and try to apply their experience from their source discipline. This may not always work, because KM has unique features. It's important in this case to take the implementation step by step, grow your experience in KM and get buy-in gradually, rather than going big bang all at once.

The lack of experience may also apply to senior sponsors of KM. Business leaders may say they want to do KM, but they don't really understand what they are looking for. The natural response in some knowledge managers is to try to educate them to maintain buy-in and support, but they quickly lose interest because it all seems very abstract, and the focus of the knowledge manager has shifted from actually doing useful stuff, to preaching and awareness raising with no tangible outcomes. It's much better to focus on doing useful stuff.

What Buy-in is and is not

Buy-in is not just about an initial sign-off and verbal support, and it's not just about a budget. It's about continued, sustained support, knowing what is needed and when, and making sure the resource, the people and political cover are there when you need them. It needs to be very practical.

Where buy-in needs to come from

Senior level buy-in is often important, especially if you need resources. However, it's usually most useful from the second tier not the first tier. First tier leadership support can be very political and tied to the senior person's "pet ideas" – when he/she moves on their successor may not carry through the same level of support. Priorities and business agendas may change. Second or third tier support tends to be more durable, and it tends to be closer to the operational needs of the business. However, where you have a situation where leadership figures come and go, it is the job of the knowledge manager to constantly engage at the senior level to show value and build support from multiple directions, so that if you lose a senior sponsor, you have others waiting in the wings to take over.

Senior level support is not enough. You also need operational level support from the people who will be engaged in the knowledge management activities and processes. Without their support and buy-in, you may have a very fancy project in terms of funding and initial scope, but you will not be able to show results, because you won't get the participation.

Some participants said that getting leadership buy-in might be over-rated. They may not understand what they are buying into, and they may not have the time and patience to find out. They will start paying more attention when they see some results. So getting mid-level buy-in to try something small, get some results and then grow from there might be another good strategy to use.

How to get support and buy-in

Getting and keeping support is a virtuous spiral. First you need to be able to communicate a reasonable expectation of value from KM, in terms that your two major audiences recognize – at senior level, the business case and expected business benefits; at operational level, addressing pain points and improving the effectiveness and quality of work (and work experience). Then you need to show results, which enables you to make more believable promises.

KM needs to be communicated as a set of actions that solve problems or enable opportunities – for the business, and for work – not as an abstract set of ideals and motherhood statements. To communicate the expected benefits of KM to the different audiences involves a close understanding of how the business works, both strategically and operationally.

Several participants shared that they achieved this by facilitating mapping processes in specific business functions in their organisations – either process mapping and then looking at the pain points and leverage points from KM, or knowledge mapping to identify knowledge flows and gaps to seek improvements in how they support the business process.

Mapping gets you close to the business, and it brings about a dialogue between the knowledge manager and the business, where both learn and build mutual understanding about how to work together. Find out how they are doing things, help them to simplify and solve problems. Show interest. “You just can’t lose by asking ‘How can I help you?’”.

Once you can communicate the expected benefits in realistic and achievable language that the business can understand, it is important to then start visibly delivering benefits. So take it step by step, and focus on delivering benefits, to the operational level first, and then seeing how those benefits can deliver strategic value as well. As soon as you start seeing and delivering benefits, you build them into your “story” and you communicate this upwards to leadership and sideways to the bits of the business you are not yet engaged with. Don't forget to remain visible. Examples and actual success stories work much better than promises. Get them and gather them and use them as quickly as you can.

Getting operational benefits may be more sustainable and achievable in the long term but it does not always seem “sexy” to the senior leadership. So you have to be constantly looking for ways to elevate the impact of what you are doing so that it can be shown to deliver strategic benefits to the business as well (in terms that the senior leadership understand and take seriously). Become proficient at connecting mid-level problems to strategic results.

Buy-in is not something you get at the beginning, and then you are set for life. It has to be constantly managed and re-calibrated and re-tuned. It has to be constantly reinforced and built up from success stories. Getting buy-in and maintaining buy-in is equivalent to having

an effect. If you don't have a positive effect in the business, your buy-in will disappear very quickly.

One powerful way of maintaining and growing buy-in is to use the words of the participants and beneficiaries of KM interventions. Don't use your own words, use theirs, and credit them. When the language comes from the business, it is much more easily accepted by the rest of the business.

Another piece of advice was “don't carry the bosses' message – your job is to carry the KM message to both the bosses and the other layers”. Knowledge managers need to be seen as honest brokers who are of value both to leadership and to the operational levels.

Pitfalls

One common pitfall is to assume that what works well for one function will work well for another. Sometimes you can deliver benefits by improving the documentation around processes. But in other kinds of work that involve more interaction, documentation impedes the flow of work. Don't blindly apply a success in one area to other areas. Always make sure you are working from a close understanding of the “client's” working needs and pain points.

Sometimes, especially when new IT systems are involved, you will get pushback, like “I don't have the time to learn your new system”. The rational solution is not always the most accepted solution. In general, if you can, the advice was to limit the number of IT tools you are introducing. Just focus on what's really needed, then be prepared to explain and support and explain and support and explain and support. Don't underestimate the amount of time and support people will need to adopt a new tool.

Another common pitfall is to come across as trespassing on somebody else's territory. For example, in technical areas you may have subject matter experts who see you as an outsider – “the knowledge is ours, who are you?” We can't go in as “experts” telling them what to do and what's best for them, we have to go in as learners and facilitators – where are your problems, where can we help. In some cases, you find you are actually more of a traffic cop, linking up people with needs and people with resources. Common modes of activity that seem to work are:

- Mapping
- Connecting
- Facilitating
- Helping

What this means is that knowledge managers get their power and influence from empowering other people. This is how buy-in becomes self-sustaining.

In some organisations, it is a mistake to call it KM. Use the language that works for your audience. One participant calls it “process mapping”. In another organization, “communities of practice” sound too “fluffy” - they use the term “technical networks”.

Effective Knowledge Managers

Effective knowledge managers are both persistent and passionate. They understand their organisation's business at both operational and strategic levels, and they are able to connect these levels, or they are prepared to sit with the business owners and learn how the business works. They are good at understanding and navigating the politics of the organization without playing those politics. Their activity patterns tend to be:

- **Engagement** – engaging in learning and problem-solving conversations with their different stakeholders at different levels
- **Expectation-setting** – being very clear and very practical in setting and communicating realistic, achievable goals
- **Enthusiasm** – good at maintaining their own enthusiasm and passion, and communicating it to the people they work with, celebrating successes in the words of the business owners
- **Explaining** – being prepared to explain how the different pieces of the KM puzzle are connected (processes, roles, tools and system, governance and metrics) and why they are all important, and being patient enough to explain this repeatedly until it's understood
- **Extrovert** – knowledge managers need to be constantly alert to opportunities in the social environment around them, and to take every opportunity to engage people in conversation listen to them, and share what's working elsewhere in the organization.

PJL 9 December 2015