

Sustainable Knowledge Management

by Edgar Tan

Senior management support is one of those factors that you need working for you when managing organisational knowledge. So when we meet prospective clients for the first time we try to assess the extent of senior management support that they are getting for their KM project. It is not uncommon for the chief executive or even the board chairperson to be the one calling for something to be done to manage the organisation's knowledge.

For example:

- A KM project was initiated because the chief executive of a Singapore multinational recalled that a particular issue had surfaced before in their China operations. It had been solved then, but yet no documentation on the lesson learnt could be found.
- A chief executive of a government agency commissioned a major KM project because she could not get the information she needed to make decisions about policies and programmes, even though that information existed across scattered locations.
- In another public sector agency, the KM project was initiated by the board chairman himself although the underpinning reasons were never made clear to the KM team much less to us.

We can consider one box checked when a KM team enjoys the support of their chief executive or even chairperson but we have seen that this alone will not guarantee that a KM project will be successful.

Chief executives can underestimate the amount of resources needed to address their organisation's knowledge issues. Take the example of the chief executive of the Singapore multinational who could not locate the lesson that he was sure had been learnt. In order for a lesson learnt to be retrievable, first it has to be properly elicited, then documented, named (or metatagged) and stored before it can be retrieved. Somebody who might benefit from the lesson has to know (or guess) that it exists and go looking for it. The seemingly simple lifecycle of a lesson learnt needs the right people, process, technology and habits to bring it to bear. If any of these enablers runs askew then one can expect a predicament similar to that chief executive.

Chief executives can also underestimate the amount of time needed for change to take place. We have encountered on numerous occasions chief executives who want Rome built "yesterday." People, process, technology and habits, all take time to change even where there is a recognised need. For example, instituting a lessons learnt process may require the training of a team of in-house facilitators. If a culture of finger pointing exists, it will take time to change people's attitudes and behaviours during a lessons elicitation session. Upgrading to a new document management system can take six months to a year or even more, from

drafting the requirement specifications to identifying the right vendor, to developing, testing and finally commissioning the system.

Another area chief executives tend to underestimate is the structural support that they will need to give in order for KM to work. The most common barrier to knowledge sharing in our experience is not so much unwillingness to share but rather not having time to share. People we survey often tell us that they don't have time to participate in activities like learning and knowledge sharing when key performance indicators loom large. There aren't many companies like 3M and Google who give their employees the latitude to set aside 15 and 20 percent of their time, respectively, to pursue non-core activities. Paradoxically, it is during these unfettered times when innovation breeds. Post-it notes, Gmail and Google Earth are famously results of such free time.

While the support of the chief executive is a key success factor it also has its attendant risks, one of which is that chief executives do leave. The turnover is higher in some cases than in others. In the Singapore public and government-linked sectors, for example, chief executives get rotated out every two to three years. The incoming executive will have certain priorities, and tackling the inherited knowledge challenges usually isn't at the top of the list or even one of them. Often, new chief executives have limited time to impress their own agenda, and the pet project of their predecessor can fall by the wayside. Like the examples given earlier, the motivation to manage organisational knowledge usually comes from not being able to obtain the necessary knowledge. The break in support from the top person sometimes means that the end of KM in that organisation is in sight.

Take the example of a public sector agency that had commissioned a large KM project with a corporate taxonomy as one of its deliverables. We had gone through the usual process of evidence gathering, drafting and testing and were at the cusp of implementing the taxonomy in their document management system when the chief executive left. The new executive consulted his senior management team who in general preferred to stick to their old ways of organising knowledge and a decision was made to shelve the taxonomy.

In another example, after the new chief executive of a Singapore multinational had been briefed on the KM strategy and plan, he asked why information had to be reorganised and made more findable in their intranet when all he had to do to get information was to call the right person and ask for it.

The new chief executive of a Singapore public sector agency put paid to all innovation projects including KM. Her people were to focus on delivering core services only.

At a transnational non-governmental organisation the new director general removed almost all KM roles and functions, essentially erasing the bulk of the work that had gone on before.

They say fortune is fickle but organisational KM can be as fickle if it relies solely on the support of the chief executive or chairperson. So what can we do to hedge against the fickleness of such support?

Here are three suggestions:

One, cultivate support from other senior managers. Take the time to build relationships with them and find ways to show how KM can bring value to their respective functional areas.

Two, contract the outgoing chief executive to sell the KM vision to the board and her replacement rather than leave it to you to do the convincing. A message coming from a peer will have more traction.

And finally, embed KM interventions into mainstream work processes instead of positioning them as add-on activities, so that even if the support from the chief executive should evaporate it will continue to generate value for your organisation.

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