Failing to Learn

At a knowledge management workshop recently, I passed around a small plastic box to the participants. "Here," I said, "put some knowledge in here." Some participants just stared. One or two wrote something down on a piece of paper and put it in. But of course, the aim was not to collect pieces of paper, but to try to characterise the dilemma that is knowledge management. We moved on into a discussion of what KM is, and how the KM industry represents itself. Is it really about aggregating pieces of what people know – on piece of paper or in digital format? Others felt it was about promoting a culture of knowledge-sharing. If technology was involved, it was about giving people access to each other, and making it easy to collaborate.

In this article I want to suggest that knowledge management in Asia is badly adrift – because it is still perceived as an optional extra, and because it is still perceived as a technological solution occasionally cast with a human face. Because nobody really understands what it is, because for all the words spoken about it, almost nobody can see it working in practice. I want to suggest that knowledge management in Asia will never become truly relevant until it is seen as a vital component in the corporate struggle for relevance and prosperity – the constant and unrelenting struggle against failure. Until, that is, practical examples of it are made visible, to be seen and touched and explored in an Asian context.

For some time I have been puzzling over the paucity of good knowledge management case studies in Singapore and the region. I know that there are people out there struggling with knowledge management issues – I know some of those people. I know these people are learning a great deal from their failures, frustrations, and small successes. But nobody is telling. The perennial case studies out of Fuji Xerox, Lexis-Nexis, Lotus – brilliantly as they are presented, simply don't count. They are vendor-driven and political in intent. From them we can learn about visions and ideals, we can't learn about real life.

What case studies do emerge into the light of day for people to look at are sanitised beyond belief. In fact, there seems to be an unwritten rule in the industry (and this is as true of Europe and the United States as anywhere else), that a KM case study isn't respectable unless it has been sanitised beyond belief. If Hollywood gives us escapist visions of what it is to live and love and succeed in life, then Harvard Business

School is the Hollywood of the business world – giving us escapist

visions none the less entertaining and captivating – and just as unreal.

Go to any conference and you will have a raft of happy success stories being trotted out to a confused and uncertain audience. The better audiences will ask assertive questions and probe for the reality behind the vision. The better audiences will spend more time talking to their peers in the audience than making notes in the "case study" sessions. The better conferences will encourage – nay, compel – the conference participants to talk to each other. The more common conferences are populated with audiences who lack confidence, speakers who are unable to bridge the gap from idea to reality, and themes based on visions rather than the grit of daily life. I too am a sinner.

And why do we believe that successes will teach us anything? We have never learnt from sanitised success. We are a recalcitrant species – we learn much better from failure than from success. If there is anything in our successes to teach us, it is the shadow of failure and risk that accompanied us along the way, before our success became secure.

At the height of the Separation Crisis in May 1965, the Secretary General of UMNO Jaafar Albar made a speech characterising Mr Lee Kuan Yew as a "frightened man chased by his own shadow". Two days

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later, Mr Lee walked into the Federal Parliament in Kuala Lumpur and made a combative speech defending the PAP position point by point. "What can I do about my shadow, Mr Speaker, Sir; it must follow me?". In the midst of that crisis, with rumour and counter-rumour about arresting the PAP leadership and imposing extra-constitutional means to resolve the crisis, the shadow that followed Mr Lee was indeed dark. But it was less a spectre of fear, than a spectre of risk, a spectre of failure. It was not yet clear in those heavy days, which would prove to be the victor – the flesh and blood Mr Lee and his flesh and blood colleagues in the PAP government, or the shadow of imminent failure that dogged their steps.

In 1994-5 Mr Lee gave a series of interviews to a *Straits Time*s team in which he acknowledged the importance of his relationship with failure: "When I went in[to politics], I had to be comfortable with my own self, that I can live with failure. And failure means it has failed, the communists have won and I'm in deep trouble. Either I have to flee, or they will brainwash me, break me… I prepared myself for the possibility of failure, for the possibility of being able to live with failure."

And catastrophic failure was an explicit presence in Mr Lee's political formation. In the mid-1990s he speculated whether he would enter politics then if he were again a young man. "Given this kind of a Singapore, I'd ask myself: What they need is a real bad setback and then they'll understand how damn fortunate they are. Then they will learn. Let the setback take place first, then I'll enter politics…. I was the product of the times. That Japanese Occupation brought the whole world crashing down…. From that, it all happened."

Mr Lee's attitude to failure is a respectful one. He acknowledges that it exists, he weighs it up, he brings it into the open where it can be seen – and dealt with. In an August 1967 speech he characterised his approach to transparency about failure: "In other parts of the world, when their pigs suffer from swine fever, they hush it up. They pretend they do not have it. Net result: all pigs get infected, the position becomes permanently chronic. We can do likewise. But we will become permanently a chronic society: sick. So when we get swine fever, we announce it, alert everyone so that we can arrest the spread of the disease and bring it back to normalcy." And despite his government's sensitivity to inter-racial issues, going public on his concerns about the gaps in academic and professional performance between races was a concrete rendering of that policy of combative openness towards the spectre of failure.

It is unfortunate, then, that we spend our lives concealing failure – even, at times, from ourselves. It is unfortunate that failure is given scant respect in the public domain – and yet, even our proclivity to scandal, gossip and almost lascivious attention to the detail of failure is probably our personal and social device for learning from other people's mistakes.

In his important book on human learning theory *Tell Me A Story*, artificial intelligence expert Roger Schank points out that we formulate and tell stories in order to create learning scripts for ourselves that we can apply to the different kinds of situations that we find ourselves in. Any situation that we haven't experienced personally but might need to cope with, is a candidate for curiosity. We want to hear the story as a relatively safe means of learning the script by proxy.

So we learn from failure, and we learn much more safely from stories about failure. The trouble is, when it comes to knowledge management, a few brave pioneers are failing in splendid isolation, learning a great deal with buttoned down mouths, and nobody is telling their stories for the benefit of the many. Why is that?

> I think there are three main reasons:
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> **Confidence about Knowledge Management**
> **Hollywoodization of Knowledge Management**
> **Kiasuism about Knowledge**

Confidence about Knowledge Management

The first reason for restraint is a lack of self-confidence. Precisely because there are no publicly available "scripts" for how to do KM successfully – or unsuccessfully – we don't know in the isolation of our struggle whether our efforts "count" as respectable efforts. I vividly remember how, early in my training career, I attended a seminar with my British colleagues given by a much more experienced trainer. "How do you do your lesson planning?" he asked. We shuffled our feet and looked at the ground. Nobody wanted to expose themselves to possible ridicule.

In fact, pretty soon, out of the superior gaze of the expert, I discovered that we were all pretty okay trainers. We weren't all world

class quality, but as we relaxed with each other and discussed our ideas and experiences and experiments – and failures – we began to learn. And we began to get much better. More important, we began to have a healthier respect for failure. Okay, if that class didn't work, now I know what doesn't work, I know why, and I can share that with my colleagues. We became more confident about being observed failing. But in the presence of the "expert" we were struck dumb.

The Hollywoodization of Knowledge Management

The second main reason is a profound misunderstanding about the role of stories in our lives. The Hollywoodization of stories in personal life, and the Harvard Business Schoolization of stories in management life have taught us to treat stories either as entertainment or as moralistic allegories. They are sanitised and inauthentic. They don't describe the world as it is. They work like Victorian school texts full of didactic intent – stories don't challenge us any more, they give us lists of things we should do or not do. They teach us nothing, and heaven forbid they should give us anything we would have to think hard about. Unfortunately, the spectre of failure does really haunt us in the real world, we do have to puzzle and ponder about how to act, and to-do lists simply don't cater to that: we have to improvise that part, and we are woefully prepared.

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We need authentic stories. We need stories about failure. We need stories about why companies go bust and why deals fail. We need

stories about what people say and do in the midst of a crisis. For a while in 1999-2000, we thought we believed this. The celebration of failure was a new economy mantra – we all nodded when the gurus told us that in Silicon Valley the best companies looked for people's experience with failure on their resumes, rather than their experience with success. When dot coms themselves began to fail, we showed our true colours, quickly reversing our position on the wondrous quality of public failure: failed dot commers found it harder and harder to find jobs in the respectable world of success.

The truth is, that competitive markets will not of themselves sponsor the publication of failure. I work in a dot com which is struggling for existence. When a young business struggles for its existence, whether it be for investment or clients, much of the burden of that struggle is about gaining people's confidence in your ability to perform in the real world. In the midst of that, it would be foolish and irresponsible for me to bring our many failures into light of day.

But ironically, we need true stories of failure to teach us how to survive. Networking and intelligence gathering and reflection on our own failures is essential to the value of what we do.

So where can we get authentic stories of failure, and authentic words from those who are at the coalface of risk? Probably not in the public arena of conferences. Workshops and informal networking events around conferences are ideal. But remember how we all froze in the presence of the "expert" – for such events to work they need to be peer-driven and unthreatening. Government departments and statutory boards have excellent access to case studies where there is a government support scheme in place. But governments are hampered by politics – it's not cool to publicise failure if there are government funds attached. We can only hope that in Singapore the drive towards excellence will arrive at the conclusion that failure is worth public respect.

The company I work for, Knowledge Platform, is now working on a virtual community building project in the cutting edge, pioneer areas of e-business, where everybody engaged in the implementation is failing and learning and failing and learning. The practitioners failing today are now the true experts, far more knowledgeable than the Big Five consultants who documented somebody's anonymous failure last year, but who prefer to focus on the encouraging success stories. These practitioners want to communicate, because they know they need to, and the power of bringing them together for collaboration and

knowledge-sharing will create the knowledge of the future for the sectors where they work.

Professional associations are natural vehicles for promoting knowledge sharing, so long as they do not succumb to the sanitisation disease. The recently formed Information and Knowledge Management Society (www.ikms.org.sg) holds great potential if it can foster openness and networking among practitioners in Singapore.

Business schools, business school lecturers, and consultants have unparalleled access to good stories and case studies via their clients and their students. Where consultants may be hampered by their professional relationships, conflict of interest issues may arise in publicising failures. But business schools are often better placed to play a valuable, more disinterested role in the dissemination of stories of failure. This brings us to the third impediment towards valuable knowledge sharing about failure.

Kiasuism about Knowledge

One of the reasons why there are so few public stories from consultants and from business schools are that these stories are considered assets. And here we encounter the supremely ironic rub: if one of the main achievements of knowledge management to date is that it has inspired recognition of the value of knowledge as a corporate asset, then it has probably shot itself in the foot as far as promoting knowledge-sharing is concerned.

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While companies believed that they were primarily about making money out of products and services, they exported knowledge merrily to their business partners and out-sourcees. Everybody prospered – so long as people didn't explicitly realise they were sharing an "asset". Now, concerns about intellectual property, haggling over licensing fees and endless concerns about leakage of "proprietary" and potentially valuable knowledge, dominate even the most basic of business partnerships. Ask a consultant to share her case studies, and she will make a vague comment and look away, or ask a question about how much she'll be paid for it. Ask a business school, and they'll mutter something about it "not being theirs to give".

Kiasuism is supposed to be a uniquely Singaporean quality: it is not, of course. It's a uniquely human quality, granted the privilege of a label by the Singaporean's robust sense of self-recognition. Kiasuism about knowledge is a fear of losing out by giving knowledge freely. There is a hunch that it might be worth something (all the experts say knowledge is an asset and should be measured, and heck, people out there seem to want it), coupled with uncertainty about how much it might be worth and how you do measure it. What this all leads to is a terrible limbo where everybody sits back and talks endlessly about sharing while disclosing nothing of the cards held so firmly to their chests. So nobody deals, nobody learns, and the currency of knowledge goes out of date.

I started by saying that knowledge management in Asia was adrift. The problems and the issues I have described are not unique to Asia. But the rein that is given to public curiosity about failure is much tighter in Asia, there is a tighter, more courtly, more collaborative approach to what is proper to uncover in public about one's competitors. In the United States, curiosity about failure is given much freer rein – not always in the most responsible way. Asia has an opportunity to tackle its lack of confidence, its search for the authentic learning stories, and its collaborative counterpoint to the kiasu approach, in a characteristically responsible Asian fashion. But the fears and uncertainties that prevent sharing and collaboration exist worldwide.

We need more of the spirit that brought Mr Lee Kuan Yew into the Federal Parliament House in Kuala Lumpur on May 27th 1965 to refute his critics one by one, speaking with a clear and present perception of what failure really meant.

The question I want to end with is this: if we can't share real-world knowledge about knowledge management efforts externally, then how can we expect to share knowledge internally about anything else? The same root causes underlie both failures. Nobody is innocent, and we are all failing. Hallelujah. Let's have more of these stories.

*Lee Kuan Yew quotations taken from *Lee Kuan Yew: the Man and his Ideas* (Times Editions, Straits Times Press, 1998)

This article first published in *The Business Times*, Singapore, July 17, 2001.