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JOURNAL OF INFORMATION SYSTEMS APPLIED RESEARCH

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Assessing Cultural Aspects of Organizations for Knowledge Management Initiatives

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Abstract

Managing organizational knowledge is a critical factor in the success of any institution. A key goal of knowledge management initiatives is to strengthen organizational culture. An appropriate culture must exist in the organization for knowledge management initiatives to be successful. This paper represents a review of literature aimed at providing a strategy for the understanding of organizational culture in order to assist in the development of an effective knowledge- management plan. In particular, this paper will focus on the work put forth by Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal as well as Dave Logan, John King and Halee Fisher-Wright. The goal of this paper is to examine the similarities between the respective authors' notions of organizational frames and the tribes that exist within organizations. It applies the concepts as a tool to address knowledge management barriers within organizations.

Keywords: knowledge, knowledge management, organizational culture, Bolman and Deal Four Frames Model, organizational tribes

1. INTRODUCTION

Managing organizational knowledge is a critical factor in the success of any institution. The ability to capture and effectively use knowledge is heavily dependent on the culture of the organization. Indeed, understanding the entity's culture is crucial to the development of a knowledge management strategy. Without this understanding, knowledge remains a wasted asset.

A key goal of knowledge management (KM) initiatives is to strengthen organizational culture (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; DeLong, 1997; Jennex et al. 2009; Nonaka, 2007). Ironically, an appropriate culture must exist in the organziation for knowledge management initiatives to be successful. Successful knowledge management initiatives lead to the creation of learning organizations and new knowledge (Nonaka, 2007). Jennex et al. (2009) indicate eight beneficial performance outcomes generated by KM initiatives; Product and service quality, productivity, innovative ability and activity, competitive capacity and position in the market, proximity to customers and customer satisfaction, employee satisfaction, communication and knowledge sharing, and knowledge transparency and retention (p. 177). The measure of success for these initiatives are dependent on the KM resources used, the relationships personnel build across the organization, and the values and underlying assumptions of the employees toward knowledge as an asset.

This paper represents a review of literature aimed at providing a strategy for the understanding of organizational culture in order to assist in the development of an effective knowledge management plan. In particular, this paper will focus on the notions put forth in *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership* by Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal (2008) as well as *Tribal Leadership: Leveraging Natural Groups to Build a Thriving Organization* by Dave Logan, John King and Halee Fisher-Wright (2008).
The goal of this paper is to examine the similarities between the respective authors' notions of organizational frames and the tribes that exist within organizations. (The notion of organizational tribes is explained in section 6 of this article). It applies the concepts as a tool to address knowledge management barriers within organizations.

2. KNOWLEDGE AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Before addressing any strategy for knowledge management it is important to identify key terms and concepts. Knowledge management remains just as crucial to an organization in 2015 as it did when Peter Drucker first described the "knowledge society" in the 1980's. It is the cornerstone of an institution's competitive strategy and the foundation for an organization's survival (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Naserieh, Pourkiani, Ziaadini, & Fahim, 2012; Serban & Luan, 2002; Schmitz, Rebelo, Gracia, & Tomas, 2014). Davenport and Prusak provide a more comprehensive definition of knowledge; Knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the minds of knowers. In organizations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories but also in organizational routines, processes, practices, and norms (1998, p. 5).

Knowledge can be characterized into two forms, explicit and tacit. Explicit and tacit are not mutually exclusive, but coexist within an institution at the individual, group, and organizational levels (O'Dell & Grayson, 1998; Sabherwal & Becerra-Fernandez, 2003; Serban & Luan, 2002). Explicit knowledge is found in an organization's policies, procedure manuals, and institutional documents such as the mission, vision and value statements and is easily codified, stored and transferred (Gao, Meng, & Clarke, 2008; Kidwell, Vander-Linde, & Johnson, 2000). Tacit knowledge is personal and individualized. It is created and validated by personal experience, contextualized in specific situations, and influenced by personal values, and cannot be easily communicated or transferred (Cardoso, Meireles, & Ferreira Peralta, 2012; Kidwell, Vander-Linde, & Johnson, 2000; Nonaka, 1994; Polanyi 1966). "Tacit knowledge is the deep understanding of how to act on knowledge effectively" (Kidwell et al. 2000, p. 31). It is the management of this knowledge, specifically tacit knowledge, that promises to deliver huge returns for organizations that learn to use it effectively (Kidwell et al. 2000).

Knowledge management (KM) is the systematic process of identifying, capturing, and transferring information and knowledge to those who need it in a timely manner. It is critical to the success of the organization, impacting the operational efficiency, leadership, and strategic decision-making of the institution (Jennex, Smolnik, & Croasdell, 2009). There are six phases in the knowledge management process according to Cardoso (as cited in Schmitz et al., 2014); Creation and acquisition, attribution of meaning, sharing and diffusion, organization memory, measurement, and recovering. Organizational culture greatly impacts the management of its knowledge in each phase of the KM process.

3. ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Culture is an important aspect of any institution. Ironically, there is no unified definition of culture. This paper relies on Shein's definition of organizational culture: the "Pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaption and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (Shein, 2010). An organization's culture can be viewed at three levels: artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions (Schein, 2010). Artifacts are easily observed in the physical spaces of the institution, the apparent behaviors of employees, and how work is organized and processed (McDermott & O'Dell, 2001; Schein, 2010). Artifacts can be aligned with the explicit knowledge within an organization. Espoused beliefs and values can be seen in the organization's stated vision, mission and goals but also can be found in individual ideals, principles and personal aspirations (McDermott &

O'Dell, 2001; Schein, 2010). This level of culture is expressed as explicit knowledge and also the more personal, unspoken tacit knowledge. The cultural level of basic underlying assumptions represents the unstated thoughts, feelings, and perceptions that influence decision-making actions and employee behavior (Schein, 2010).

This level of culture is the invisible dimension of an organization not easily or readily communicated and relates to tacit knowledge (McDermott & O'Dell, 2001). In addition to these levels of culture within an institution there also exists a collection of subcultures and micro-cultures that exist based on organizational hierarchy, geographic location, or are defined by a common set of functions or tasks by a group of individuals (Schein, 2010). Within the same institution each of these subcultures and micro-cultures can have their own artifacts, espoused beliefs and underlying assumptions.

4. CULTURE AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

An institution's culture significantly impacts knowledge and knowledge management tools, processes, and initiatives (McDermott & O'Dell, 2001). DeLong (1997) identified four ways in which culture and knowledge interact within an organization. Institutional culture shapes the assumptions and determines what knowledge is useful and important to an organization, who owns particular knowledge, what knowledge is communicated and how is it communicated, and the acceptance or rejection of new knowledge through validation by the organization (DeLong, 1997). Szulanski (1993) indicated four cultural barriers to the successful sharing and transferring of best practices and knowledge within an organization. The first barrier is ignorance on both ends of the transfer of knowledge, i.e., individuals with knowledge did not realize its value to others, and others seeking knowledge did not know where to find it. The second is the absorptive capacity, or the lack of resources to obtain the knowledge. Third is the lack of relationship between a knowledge- holder and the knowledge-receiver. The final barrier is the slow rate of adoption of new knowledge caused by a lack of motivation within the organization.

5. BOLMAN AND DEAL'S FOUR FRAME MODEL

Bolman and Deal's *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership* provides four frames to examine an organization and its culture: structure, politics, human resources and symbolism. Through each of these frames a manager or leader can examine and define the artifacts, espoused values and underlying assumptions of the culture at the organizational, subculture, and micro-cultural level. In studying an organization's culture, barriers to effective knowledge management can be addressed.

Organizations and organizational cultures are complex. As previously stated Bolman and Deal (2008) propose a four frame model for understanding an organization. Structure refers to the formal relationships, goals, technology, work processes, and rules within an organization. The human resource frame addresses the needs, skills, and relationships between individuals that work in an institution. The political frame examines the struggles for limited resources and the allocation and balance of power. The symbolic frame explores the meaning of rituals, ceremonies, stories and heroes and their important impact on the culture of an organization (Bolman and Deal, 2008).

6. LOGAN'S FIVE TRIBES

In *Tribal Leadership: Leveraging Natural Groups to Build a Thriving Organization*, Logan, King and Fischer-Wright state that within an organization, people form a tribe or tribes. What is a Tribe?

- A tribe is any group of about 20 to 150 people who know one another enough that, if they saw another walking down the street, they would stop and say "hello"
- They are likely than people in your cell phone and in your Outlook address book
- A small company is a tribe, and a large company is a tribe of tribes
- Culture makes some tribes more effective than others. Each time people speak, their words exhibit the characteristics of one of five tribal stages. Stage 5 outperforms 4, which accomplishes more than 3, which gets more done then 2, which is more effective than 1
- A medium to large Tribe (50-150 people) usually has several cultural stages operating at the same time (Logan, et al., 2008)

Organizational leaders must focus on the language that is used and the relationships that are formed within and between these internal tribes (Logan, et al., 2008).

The authors develop the idea of members of organizations evolving through five stages of awareness and group interaction.

Stage 1 – "Life Sucks"
Stage 2 – "*My* Life Sucks"
Stage 3 – "I'm Great"
Stage 4 – "We're Great"
Stage 5 – "Life is Great"

The authors maintain that the goal of an organization's leadership should be to push most if not all members to achieve stage five, a level in which members work for the good of the organization and society at large.

See Appendix A for a table summarizing the 5 levels of Organizational Tribes as described by Logan, et al.

7. MODEL FOR UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

The ideas put forth by Logan and colleagues in *Tribal Leadership* parallel the four frames concept developed by Bolman and and presented in *Reframing Organizations*. It is the process of evolving through Logan's 5 stages that mirrors the four frames of Human Resources, Structure, Symbolism, and politics of Bolman and Deal's model. A comparison of the two respective concepts demonstrates their similarities as well as their usefulness for understanding organizational culture (and by extension one can use this understanding to develop a sound knowledge management strategy).

Logan et al's ideas of tribal leaders, (i.e., people who change the culture of an organization) is similar to the notion of the "cultural hero" put forth by Bolman and Deal. "Without the leaders building the tribe, a culture of mediocrity will prevail. Without an inspired tribe, leaders are impotent (Logan, et al., 2008)." Bolman and Deal discuss the idea of cultural heroes. People, who are not always management, can influence the culture of the organization (Bolman and Deal, 2008). "Doing their jobs, ordinary people often perform exemplary deeds" (Bolman and Deal, 2008). These people influence others in the organization and become role models for those around them, changing attitudes (Bolman and Deal, 2008).

In the Bolman and Deal model these heroes reflect the symbolic frame. The model maintains that the symbolic frame is made of five suppositions. One of these is "culture forms the superglue that bonds an organization, unites people, and helps an enterprise accomplish desired ends (Bolman and Deal, 2008)."

This notion of culture is paralleled in *Tribal Leadership* where the authors claim that every tribe has its own culture. "Every tribe has a dominant culture" (Logan, et al., 2008). Where Logan et al. differ from Bolman and Deal's model is that they state that an organization is made of differing tribes each with their own culture. The goal of the leader should be to bring every member of the organization into the stage five culture. "There are many heroes…But two stand out as Tribal Leaders because their efforts have gone a long way to upgrade tribal culture (Logan, et al. 2008)."

While the tribal model offers a spin on the issue, the underlying ideas are the same as Bolman and Deal. The role of the leader is to bring the members of the organization into a united culture focused on the betterment of the organization.

It is the tribal leaders who provide the motivation to take on a KM initiative, and champion the effort by gathering the buy-in from tribal members to increase the rate of adoption and create the upwelling of knowledge transfer and sharing.

Bolman and Deal extend their notions further when entertaining the political frame of an organization. They state that "organizations are coalitions of assorted individuals and interest groups (Bolman and Deal, 2008)." Furthermore, their assessment of the political frame claims that coalition members have different perceptions of reality (Bolman and Deal, 2008). Bolman and Deal do not describe these coalitions as tribes, but the fundamental descriptions of their coalitions and the notions of organizational tribes put forth by Logan and colleagues are the same. "People always form tribes and that the dominant cultural stage determines effectiveness (Logan, et al., 2008)." The terms 'coalition' and 'tribe' are interchangeable. In both models, people within an organization form internal groups. Furthermore, the attitudes and perceptions of these groups can dictate the direction the organization takes unless proper leadership guides them.

Bolman and Deal's political frame determines the resources available for a KM initiative. In addition to a champion, the knowledge management initiative requires financial assets and human

resource commitments (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; O'Dell & Grayson, 1998).

It is in the human resources frame that the similarities between the two hypotheses truly comes into focus. Bolman and Deal present two key assertions about the human resource frame. First, if there is a poor fit between an individual and organization, both suffer: both become susceptible to exploitation. Second, if there is a good fit between the two, both flourish: individuals find meaningful work and organizations retain necessary talent and functional energy (Bolman and Deal, 2008).

The main difference between the two models is that the tribal model breaks people down further into tribes and offers descriptions for the behavior of each tribe. The authors then claim to offer insights into how to move this tribe to the next level. While presenting it in a different manner than the four frame model, the tribal theory's description of a tribe's transition into stage four is apparent. "People collaborate and work toward a noble cause, propelled from their values…People seek employment in the company and stay, taking the company a long way toward winning the war for talent (Logan, et al. 2008)." Just as in the four frame model, the tribal model puts forth that as tribes enter into stage four they find a "good fit" and both the organization and individual flourish.

This is in stark contrast to stage two, where a "person at Stage Two will often try to protect his or her people from the intrusion of management. The mood that results from Stage Two's theme, "my life sucks," is a cluster of apathetic victims (Logan, et al., 2008)." Here the individuals are in a bad fit in an organization and thus are feeling exploited or exploiting the organization and dysfunctional.

Finally, the Bolman and Deal model presents the structural frame. According to the model "Where the human resource approach emphasizes dealing with issues by changing people (through training, rotation, promotion, or dismissal), the structural perspective argues for putting people in the right roles and relationships (Bolman and Deal, 2008)." This statement describing structure drives to the core of the tribal model as a whole.

The tribal model maintains that an organization can only achieve Stage 5 if tribal leaders emerge who can motivate the tribes to progress. "Tribal Leaders do two things: (1) listen for which cultures exist in their tribes and (2) upgrade those tribes using specific leverage points (Logan, et al., 2008)." This is the same message of the structural frame of Bolman and Deal. Combined with the Human Resource frame, the structural frame gives organizational management the tools necessary to identify the needs of the members and their culture (or their tribes) and to put these people (or tribes) into the proper roles to succeed. "Give everyone a choice, and then work with the living (Logan, et al., 2008)". Furthermore, it gives the tools necessary to push people who would naturally stagnate: "Without any external coaching, people advance through the stages very slowly (Logan, et al., 2008)". Both the human resource frame and the structural frame address the need for relationships to counter the cultural barriers within organizations that prevent or inhibit KM initiatives.

8. CONCLUSION

By building relationships, knowledge holders can identify those who need knowledge as well as identify where the knowledge is located within an organization. This in turn leads to greater utilization of the knowledge. In essence, a webbed network between organizational members is created that allows information and knowledge to be shared (Logan, et al. 2008).

The tribal model offers an intriguing spin on the Bolman and Deal model. It is interesting to note that at no point in the referenced text do Logan and colleagues refer to or cite the work of Bolman and Deal; however, the similarities between the two works are clear.

The works offer a complimentary tandem. Bolman and Deal generalize organizational "groups" or coalitions. Tribal theory breaks this generality into five stages, providing descriptions of each. At the same time, the tribal model then generalizes the factors necessary to move tribes to the next level, where the four frames give a context in which to develop the tools necessary to facilitate these stage moves.

An organization must codify, store and most importantly, share the knowledge the institution possesses in order to remain competitive and grow. Organizational culture plays a major part in the success or failure of knowledge management initiatives. Culture can also produce barriers to these KM initiatives. By examining an organization's culture through the

four frames indicated by Bolman and Deal, and Logan, King and Fischer-Wright's tribes and tribal leaders, barriers to knowledge management initiatives are recognized and addressed.

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Appendix A

5 Levels of Tribal Leadership	
Stage	**Description**
Stage 1 – "Life Sucks"	• 2% of U.S. workforce* • Despairingly hostile • people band together to confront a violent world
Stage 2 – "*My* Life Sucks"	• 25% of U.S. workplace "tribes"* • Passively Antagonistic • Disengaged • Seen it all before - and it will fail again • No innovation, sense of urgency, accountability • No team building, motivational speeches, core values or strategic plans will make a difference
Stage 3 – "I'm Great"	• 49% of U.S. workplaces* • I am GREAT…And you are not! • Highly competitive • Need to win • Winning is personal • Lone wolves • Knowledge is power • "Sage on the stage"
Stage 4 – "We're Great"	• 22% of U.S. workers "We are great"* • We are great and they are not • The bigger the foe, the more powerful tribe • People collaborate working toward a noble cause, propelled by personal values • Fear and stress decrease as the "interpersonal friction" of working together decreases • The entire tribe shifts from resisting leadership to seeking it out • People seek long-term employment in the company • Organizational learning becomes effortless, with the tribe actively teaching its members • Overall health statistics improve, injury rates and sick days go down • "Group think" eases development and implementation of competitive strategy
Stage 5 – "Life is Great"	• 2% of U.S. workplace* • Global impact • Miraculous innovation • Pure leadership, vision, and inspiration

* The percentages were the result of Logan et al. comprehensive research study of six organizations that included a sample size 472 people between 1997 and 2000.