

Sharing Knowledge to Enhance Development Work – Its Challenge and its Limits

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Whenever a new term is created in the development agenda, hopes are high that by introducing this term things will get better. It applies as well to the term of “knowledge sharing” and “knowledge management”. I’d like to have a closer look at the mechanisms so as to get a more realistic view of what is possible for knowledge managers and where we are chasing after another utopia.

When we talk about knowledge it is helpful to have a clear and shared understanding what we mean by knowledge. Especially when we want to go a step further and have a look at knowledge management. And faithful to the above mentioned practice, I shall be introducing a new term.

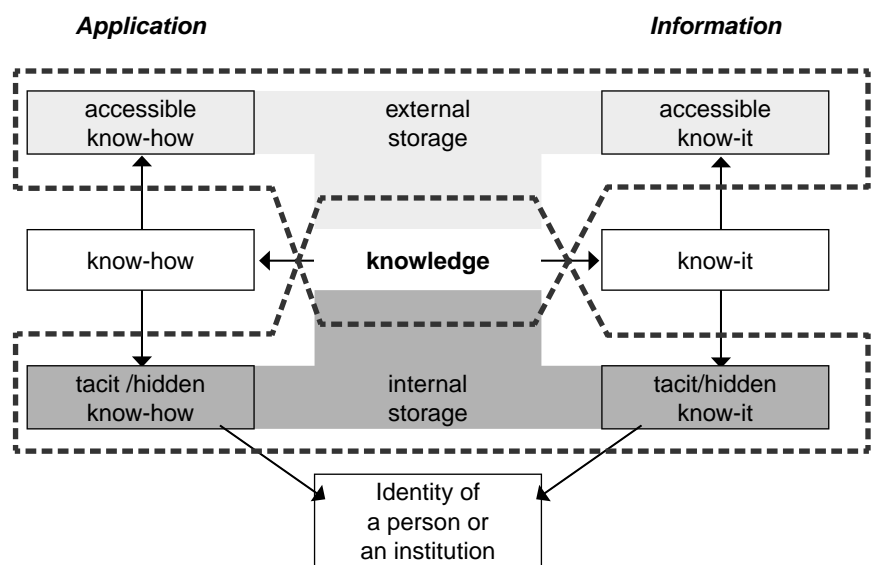
Knowledge and what is meant by it

To my understanding, there are different types of knowledge and unfortunately they are very often all put together and mixed up. There is the common term of know-how and there is another thing I’d call know-it. The know-how is linked to application. Somebody knows how to do something, s/he has got the know-how. Normally the person who wants to do something also needs a couple of know-its, s/he needs pieces of information. There is plenty of know-it that never gets to be used; it is stacked and piled up somewhere, just in case.

For both, know-how and know-it it holds true that only part of it is accessible and another part is tacit or hidden. Knowledge management, as far as I have been acquainted with, mostly deals with the acces-

sible part of know-how and know-it. A large amount of it is compiled and synthesised in books, manuals, reports and studies and it is stored in libraries or in computer files. It is then made accessible in libraries or on web-sites.

Unfortunately (for Knowledge Managers), what really shapes a person, a society or an institution consists of pieces of tacit (and partly hidden) know-how and know-it. If we try to get hold of the tacit or hidden knowledge we find that it is very difficult to seize. This happens for different reasons. The tacit knowledge is part of the culture, the common history and the shared myths of a group. On one side it is hidden and natural to a specific group and on the other side it furthers the groups’ cohesion, it helps the members of the group to identify other members of the same group. When you are aware of the right tacit know-how and know-it then you belong to this group, be it a family, a society, an enterprise or an institution. If you don’t, you remain a stranger, an outsider – and to some extent less reliable.



To make it clear to everybody what I mean by the terms let me give you an example for each.

- Accessible know-how: It is taken up in tool-kits, in manuals or, for better replication of manual tasks, in video recordings of handicrafts
- Accessible know-it: A time-table of public transport, a dictionary etc.
- Tacit/hidden know-how: A large portion of rules for social behaviour. The do's and don'ts in a specific culture. Whenever I am imparting a course in Latin America I first ask somebody confidentially which are the words not to use in this environment i.e.
- Tacit/hidden know-it: The fatherhood of a child i.e. Of course there are registers but they are reliable only to a certain extent. I still remember the refrain of a song: "Your father ain't your father but your father don't know (- it)." And in a place we were working, young people did well by asking first Dona Eudoxia before dating a girl seriously. She would then give her o.k. The same holds true for the life within an institution. It takes time before you get acquainted with the know-it of who is whose buddy.

Learning know-how and learning know-it

Now, why am I insisting on the difference between know-how and know-it as well as between accessible and tacit knowledge. It has to do with the form you get familiar with it. The know-it you take in by studying a topic. The know-how requires training, actual experiencing and practising. Let me explain. To get at the knowledge, be it know-how or know-it, you need to learn. Learning takes place at least at three levels:

- At an intellectual level of course,
- at a physical level and
- at an emotional/social level.

Most academic learning is happening predominantly at an intellectual level and dealing with know-it. On the other hand it is the pride of craftsmen to be able to do things even though they haven't studied the topic as thoroughly. I still remember a studied veterinarian who was afraid to approach the cow he was supposed to treat. A person might know everything about horse riding without being able to do so. This means that

only part of the physical learning is know-it, the other is know-how. The same holds true for the emotional learning. You might know the whole physiological symptoms of falling in love, if it never happened to you, you don't know what it means; you don't have the right kind of knowledge.

Learning tacit/hidden know-how and know-it

A major part of the tacit knowledge be it know-it or know-how is taken up in bits and pieces just by living or growing up in a society, culture or institution. You "know" how to behave, what kind of clothes to wear i.e. You "know" the important rituals of your group and you "know" who the important people are and how to get in contact with or to avoid them.

If you ask an experienced person: what are the rules of behaviour in his/her society or in this institution. S/he probably wouldn't be able to tell you all the rules. Not even for him or her this knowledge is readily accessible although s/he knows it when the occasion arises and behaves accordingly. It is the specific situation that makes us remember or triggers the pieces of tacit knowledge currently required.

Whoever has worked in foreign countries with other cultures, having another history and another background has certainly happened to experience that your easy, simple approach didn't work. You thought that everything was clear, and it wasn't. You had the best intentions, you had included all the accessible knowledge and then you find out that your plan didn't work. We are not aware of our own complete set of tacit knowledge let alone the set of our collaborators, counterparts and partners. So, it seems to me evident that this part of knowledge is out of reach for being managed.

The implications for Knowledge Management

When we talk about Knowledge Management it seems clear to me, that we mean by that the management of the accessible know-how and know-it. We are trying to improve the flow of accessible information within and among institutions. Efforts are made to improve the flow from South to North making local/indigenous knowledge accessible, too. But, as I have tried to show

above, it is the tacit knowledge that creates most misunderstandings, gives the decisive twist for success or failure.

In some cases development workers really don't have access to important and relevant pieces of hidden knowledge. In this case their failure is understandable. In other cases the knowledge is accessible and nevertheless they fail taking it into account. Let me give you an example. A donor decides to give a budget support to the government. They do it in spite of knowing that the society they are supporting is following the rules of a clan structure. It is a fully accessible knowledge that in a clan structured country each minister, every functionary has to provide funds to his/her clan. Still, donors complain about the "unreliability" of their partners when the funds surprisingly have disappeared.

Some people are proclaiming that knowledge should be made available to everybody who is interested in it. It is a virtuous claim like so many other ones. However, human nature is not easily fooled and defends its rights. In general, we can only share the accessible knowledge for reasons I have mentioned before. The tacit knowledge will not be shared for at least three reasons:

1. You don't have access yourself.
2. You find it so natural that you think "everybody" knows it already.
3. You keep the knowledge back deliberately. As soon as a know-how or know-it gives an advantage to you, be it in a business transaction, for prestige or privacy reasons or in warfare you don't share it anymore.

And the best intentioned claims don't change this situation.

So let me sum up my beliefs:

- Only the accessible knowledge can be managed.
- Taking advantage of the accessible knowledge allows us to avoid at least some mistakes.
- The crucial set of knowledge (even for development work) is tacit and consciously or unconsciously hidden.

And to close my contribution a final remark: I haven't met the donor representative yet who told his/her "partner" everything s/he knew (how much s/he earned i.e.) and among them are as likely those who advocate a universal knowledge sharing.

