



TenStep Supplemental Paper

14 April 2003

Company Culture Impacts Knowledge Sharing

One of the ways to increase the level of quality across the entire organization is to implement programs to share knowledge. Sharing knowledge helps make sure everyone knows what is expected and also helps ensure people do things the right way. Sharing key learnings and best practices also keeps people from making the same mistakes as were made in the past.

Corporate culture plays an important role in the success of any knowledge sharing program. You will struggle implementing knowledge sharing programs if you do not consider the values and culture of your company.

Consider, for example, a global company that wanted to develop a new website. The site would allow the company to share knowledge with its overseas employees and to facilitate interaction with them through methods such as chat rooms and messaging. Designers collaborated with employees during the development process, but employee interest waned during the implementation stage. Posting information became a chore because the employees were very busy already, and their managers did not encourage them to add information. So, knowledge sharing was low on the employee's priority list, and the entire effort floundered.

Corporate Culture

Corporate culture is the shared values, beliefs, and practices of employees. It is reflected in both the attitude of the employees and the measures adopted by the employers. There are both visible and invisible aspects to corporate culture.

Visible aspects: The values, philosophy, and mission statement reveal the visible aspects of the culture. This is an area of culture that you can read about.

Invisible aspects: The invisible aspect of culture lies in the core values that are understood by employees who have been with the company for a while. It takes time for new entrants to fully grasp them.

Knowledge sharing has to be clearly linked to the realities of doing business. The databases, systems, and initiatives used for knowledge sharing should have a specific business purpose and complement the culture of the organization. Management also plays an important role in determining the success of knowledge sharing. Senior level management must be openly committed and encourage employee participation in knowledge sharing.

Options for Implementing Knowledge Sharing

There are a number of ways to implement knowledge sharing.

- *As an element of business strategy.* Implementing K-S as an element of business strategy is one way to share knowledge efficiently. For example, PricewaterhouseCoopers has implemented an extensive program that engages a large



TenStep Supplemental Paper

number of staff on knowledge management. Its brand, 'people, knowledge and worlds,' depicts how knowledge is linked with people and the company.

- *As an element of another key business proposal.* In the past, knowledge at Ford was not well codified and product development groups rarely shared knowledge. During the Ford 2000 project, management made the development teams share information extensively by implementing on similar software systems and sharing project-related information was on their Internet.
- *As an element of work.* Knowledge sharing is a part of the problem-solving process. For example, employees at Lotus Development define and resolve business problems with the help of Lotus databases, which easily support knowledge sharing.

Core Values

Successful companies implement knowledge sharing programs while keeping with the core values of the company. For example, Lotus named its program *Collaboration*, American Management Systems called theirs *Leveraging work*, and Ford's was entitled *Complete Analysis*. Since the new system seemed to be an extension of the values already existent in the company, employees were less reluctant to share their ideas.

Include Leaders and All Managers

Powerful leaders can influence people to share knowledge. They also help to align invisible values with visible knowledge sharing elements. The hierarchical level of employees involved in managing the initiative differs from company to company. However, the program cannot be successful if it does not receive the endorsement of top management, and if it is not pushed hard throughout the organization. Knowledge sharing is not necessarily easy and it will not work if the company management hierarchy is not committed to begin with.