

On Knowledge Behaviors

By Olivier Serrat

Where large organizations make an effort to boost knowledge sharing, the solutions they fabricate can aggravate problems. Designing jobs for knowledge behaviors and recruiting people who are positive about sharing to start with will boost knowledge stocks and flows at low cost.

Is the Chief Cause of Problems Solutions?

"If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than 5 minutes," Albert Einstein is alleged to have said. Another apocrypha imparts that "Problems cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them." Famous remarks are seldom cited correctly but what becomes folklore is somehow imbued with wisdom: the first quote intimates that the quality of a solution is in direct proportion to that of the description of what one thinks must be solved; the second, that answers often lie outside the system.

Irrespectively, what with globalization, man devises and applies in ever-growing numbers a myriad tools, methods, and approaches to speed the business of mankind.¹ These days, competitive advantage in the corporate world is often considered to spring from knowledge management for organizational learning. (In *The Future of Management*,² Gary Hamel calls for nimble, lattice-based organizations where innovation, modern management's new panacea, is everybody's business. The work of management will be less and less the responsibility of managers: distributed leadership will come of age.) Yet, well into the 21st century, organizations that profess to manage for knowledge generation and sharing in the current competitive reality eschew the effective questions of critical thinking. Hackneyed solutions to misalignment of strategy, structure, and systems



Good management is the art of making problems so interesting and their solutions so constructive that everyone wants to get to work and deal with them.

—Paul Hawken

still proliferate—and spawn further problems—even though alternative organizational forms, characteristically flexible and open, have come into sight at business, corporate, and inter-organizational levels.³ (In contrast, in

¹ To date, processes for control, discipline, precision, stability, and above all reliability have claimed the lion's share of attention. See ADB. 2010. *Sparking Innovations in Management*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/sparking-innovations-management

² Gary Hamel. 2007. *The Future of Management*. Harvard Business School Publishing.

³ The common, contemporary paradigm is that all consider themselves bundles of knowledge-enriched products and services aiming to meet expressed or latent needs of customers. Regardless of form, all configurations have implications for knowledge management and learning; information and communication technologies; human resource management; and roles, competencies, and careers in management.

high-performance organizations, the locus of interest has for some time been purpose, processes, and people.) Since the great accomplishments of man result from ideas of enthusiasm, habits of mind and knowledge behaviors can help root out dogma—e.g., strategy, structure, and systems; imagine or invent futures; and refute Eric Sevareid's assertion that "The chief cause of problems is solutions."

Habits of Mind

By definition, a problem is any situation or matter involving uncertainty, the response to which involves perplexity or difficulty and is not immediately known. Complex problems demand craftsmanship, creativity, insightfulness, perseverance, and strategic reasoning. However, mindsets⁴ borne of our education, experience, or (especially)

A lot of people in our industry haven't had very diverse experiences. So they don't have enough dots to connect, and they end up with very linear solutions without a broad perspective on the problem. The broader one's understanding of the human experience, the better design we will have.

—Steve Jobs

environment instruct us to see things in ways that do not necessarily conduce efficient or effective problem solving, when they do not perpetuate or inflame the problem. (What is more, taking a reflective stance in the midst of active problem solving is admittedly not easy.) Exercising mindfulness, the psychological quality of self-regulation of attention coupled with curiosity and openness, can help individuals recognize and rework habitual patterns of mind. Since excellence is not an act but a practice, each of us can develop composite habits of mind that attend to value, inclination, sensitivity, capability,

and commitment—all defined toward behaving intelligently when confronted with problems. These are the transcending characteristics of peak performers.

Figure 1: 16 Habits of Mind



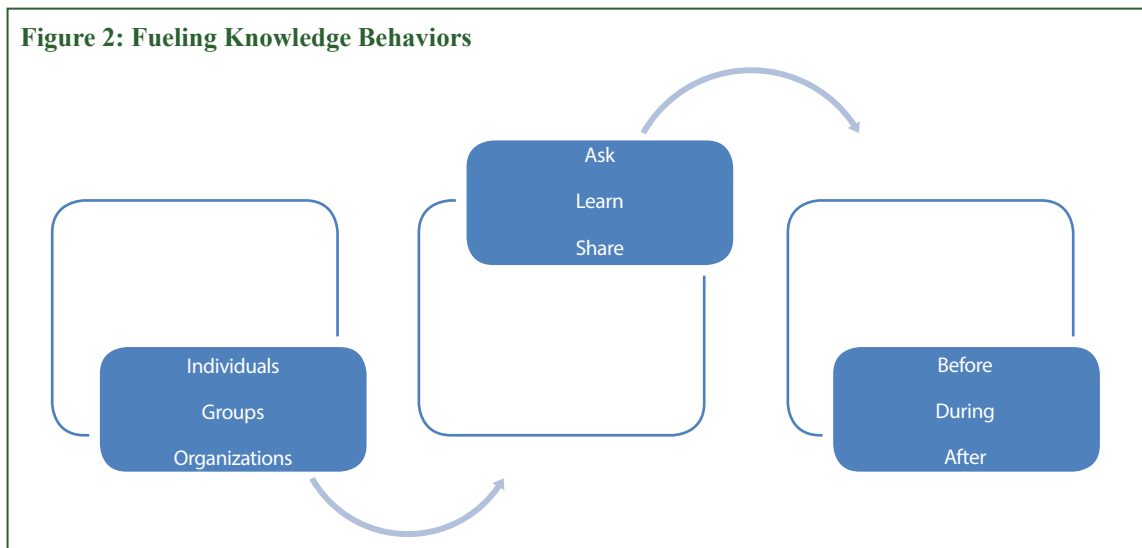
Source: Developed from Arthur Costa and Bena Kallick. 2000. *Discovering and Exploring Habits of Mind*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

⁴ A mindset is a set of assumptions—held by one or more persons or groups of people—that is so ingrained it acts as a strong incentive to continue to adopt or accept prior behaviors, choices, or techniques. The cognitive biases it cultivates beget mental inertia and "groupthink" and impact decision making.

On Knowledge Behaviors

Without a doubt, knowledge management has much to do with behavioral change. For that reason, high-performance organizations seek to minimize the drag of old mental models and help embed knowledge behaviors. What might these be? From the 16 desirable habits of mind, a practical, multi-agent operating model would see that individuals, groups, and organizations consciously ask, learn, and share before, during, and after an activity.⁵ A high-end inventory of knowledge behaviors—that together would enrich a knowledge culture—reads as follows:

- Ask—asking questions; checking first to see what already exists; questioning accepted wisdom.
- Learn—contextualizing learning to make it real; connecting and taking opportunities to learn; reviewing lessons as one goes and applying learning.
- Share—conveying personal details, roles, and skills; imparting experience, evidence, and feedback; communicating achievements, outcomes, and pride.



Source: Author.

Put differently, knowledge behaviors anchored in the 16 habits of mind require that every person, team, and community should make decided inquiries before taking action, harvest knowledge during its execution, and share the fruits of experience—however bitter—later. This is nothing new: all are fundamentally social behaviors. The difficulty, we shall see, is to do so in concert.

The Bottlenecks of Behavior

"You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink" is an adage of universal application. It signifies that you can give someone means and opportunity but cannot force that person to avail of them. The relationship between motive, means (or ability), and opportunity—and what happens where it is not close—explains much human behavior by dint of reasoned action. Beyond means and opportunity, the theory of planned behavior posits an obvious argument: intention, which is assumed to capture intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors,⁶ determines behavior, hence action.

The theory of planned behavior has had large application, for instance, in health, nutrition, and environmental psychology.⁷ In respect of knowledge sharing, however, Enno Siemsen, Aleda Roth, and Sridhar

⁵ The *Knowledge Solutions* on drawing learning charters illustrate what commitments to action organizations and the individuals within them might make. See ADB. 2009. *Drawing Learning Charters*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/drawing-learning-charters

⁶ In brief, the theory submits that human behavior is governed not only by personal attitudes toward the behavior but also by social norms regarding that and beliefs about one's control over the behavior.

⁷ For example, these days, environment-friendly actions are widely promoted as positive behaviors. In spite of that, their application can be thwarted by the belief that one's behavior will have no significant impact. Here, the theory elucidates contradictions between sustainable attitudes and unsustainable behavior.

Balasubramanian⁸ have concluded that the three variables are neither linear nor multiplicative: a bottleneck—or constraining factor—in any one of them will determine what knowledge sharing may occur;⁹ also, the variables should not be addressed independently but in a dynamic and coordinated manner. Having said this, motivation is pivotal. Surely, investigations about motive, means, and opportunity can help organizations determine better where to invest resources productively across the knowledge-sharing landscape.¹⁰

Staffing Matters

In the all-too-rare instances where large organizations make a dedicated effort at boosting knowledge sharing, endeavors generally target job design,¹¹ performance appraisal, compensation and rewards, managerial styles, information and communication technologies, and training as important predictors of motivation. These

What we need to do is learn to work in the system, by which I mean that everybody, every team, every platform, every division, every component is there not for individual competitive profit or recognition, but for contribution to the system as a whole on a win-win basis.

—W. Edward Deming

organizations should also consider recruiting personnel who already display knowledge behaviors: surely, considering person–environment fit to ensure congruence of individual and organizational values and goals is the easiest way to facilitate knowledge sharing among personnel. Evidently, an organization that values knowledge sharing and selects personnel who swear by this value will equip itself with staff who are positive about sharing to start with; investments elsewhere may no longer be so urgent because the likelihood that the organization's human resource management practices

fulfill needs will accordingly be higher. Time spent on hiring is time well spent. "Hire people who are better than you are, then leave them to get on with it. Look for people who will aim for the remarkable, who will not settle for the routine," David Ogilvy advised.

Further Reading

- ADB. 2008. *Managing Knowledge Workers*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/managing-knowledge-workers
- . 2009a. *Asking Effective Questions*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/asking-effective-questions
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- . 2011. *Critical Thinking*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/critical-thinking
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⁸ Enno Siemsen, Aleda Roth, and Sridhar Balasubramanian. 2007. How Motivation, Opportunity, and Ability Drive Knowledge Sharing: The Constraining-Factor Model. *Journal of Operations Management*. Vol. 26. pp. 426–445.

⁹ A concrete example suffices: if personnel lacks time to share knowledge—that is, if opportunity is the bottleneck—motivation and means will be blocked from having an impact on knowledge-sharing behavior. If time is the constraining factor it will make no difference how motivated personnel are or what means they have at their disposal; they simply will not engage in knowledge sharing.

¹⁰ Detecting and widening bottlenecks are essential for two reasons. In the presence of a bottleneck, resources allocated to enhancing other variables are not likely to be productive. Also, the constraining-factor model throws up insights into what metrics might be used to compare the relative costs and benefits of knowledge-sharing initiatives and gauge their progress.

¹¹ The importance of job design owes to the impact it has on staff engagement. Job descriptions usually place cognitive factors center stage. However, job design matters for fundamentally motivational reasons. Variables such as autonomy, task identity, and feedback bear on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to share knowledge, purposely in different ways, to cheer organization-wide knowledge behaviors, boost knowledge stocks and (particularly) flows, and nurture social capital: these variables are indispensable part of job descriptions.

For further information

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