

Empathy And Tacit Knowledge Within The Framework Of Knowledge Management

Roger Fontana, Columbus State University, USA

ABSTRACT:

Many organizations, including the military, are recognizing the importance of knowledge management. This article supports the significance and the role that tacit learning plays within these organizations and, specifically, within the military. In addition, empathy is an important ingredient that underlies each and every step of knowledge management. When intertwined in tacit learning and when added to explicit learning, they form a part of the KM model. Considering the seriousness of the military's mission, it is important that "getting it right" be at the top of the list for commanders. Knowledge management is the tool for accomplishing this task and a study of tacit learning and empathy provide the elements necessary for a formula for success.

Keywords: *Empathy, Tacit learning paradigm, Knowledge management, Communication model, Army knowledge management*

For several decades the information flow overwhelmed us and much of the emphasis was spent finding ways to assimilate, categorize, filter, and sort data in various formats, platforms, and programs. On the other hand, any social discourse, social context, or empathetic inclusion was either not considered or its perspective had no place in a technological arena. Many felt that technology moves or pushes empathy out. However, the notion was that sterilization of human interaction and of all removal of empathy was unrealistic, problematic, and virtually impossible. Anyone studying empathy quickly realizes that it is a characteristic or condition for use as a first step as producing a nexus between human beings.

Kakabadse, et al. (2003) in their article "Reviewing the knowledge management literature: towards a taxonomy" in the *Journal of Knowledge Management* discuss in their network models the significance of empathy as a competency which "facilitates building social relationships, social capital and attending to reciprocity" (75). They further amplify this in *KM Tools* that key drivers seem to be connections and relationships, trust, empathy, deep dialogue, and technology.

An ocean away, the Danish management board in granting their management award stated that prerequisites included a focus on empathy, knowledge sharing, business development, and fruitful co-operation (DMB, 2007). In addition, Orr and Sankaran (ECO, 2007; 44) stated that "mutually empathy for both self and others was identified

as a core capability requirement to cope with the inherent ambiguity within complex systems”.

If we accept the premise that the more people who use something, the more valuable it becomes (Metcalf's law), it is apparent that any flow of information involves people and the increase in flow requires more involvement, setting up a paradigm for social context and empathetic inclusion. In fact, numerous studies suggest the power of empathy and the requirement for its inclusion in the collective human consciousness in the community, geographic, and non-geographic regions, societies, organizations, and associations. (Daniel, 2009)

Empathy has been defined as “putting yourself in the shoes of the users.” Knowledge Management recognizes its importance and expresses it in terms of tacit knowledge, implicit, having a sense of, or reasoning from “a priori.” It also recognizes that the integration of tacit learning into any system is a necessity and, yet, an overwhelming task that can never be totally successful (Barnett, 2008). Therefore, its appropriateness and usefulness cannot and should not be underestimated. Knowledge Management's objective is to find pathways for military use forms; it is possible to progressively improve in this area and improve the confidence levels of the mission and other requirements.

According to Army FM 6-01.1 (2008) tacit knowledge consists of comprehension gained through study, experience, practice, and human interaction. It resides in an individual's mind...intuition in [one] example...so is being able to understand the critical factors on which to focus a complex situation” (1-2). The Army recognizes that both explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge are essential to help leaders make better decisions and conduct more effective operations.

Also in recognizing this, it becomes important to understand what assessment tools are available for each. When dealing with tacit learning and its empathetic properties, leaders, managers, and supervisors need to know how to capture it and how to measure it. Some assessment tools such as hands-on training, surveys, and observation can address some of this. It is through this form of knowledge transfer that sharing is an integral component and can impact on movement and adjustment of perspective. The business field has known its importance as stated in “Knowledge Praxis” (1997) a publication about the practical aspects of managing knowledge and making a direct connection between an organization's intellectual assets, both explicit and tacit – and their positive results.

If we accept that tacit learning is essential in knowledge management, then it is reasonable to assume that certain associations exist. Initially, information gathered from data relates to description, definition, or perspective (the what, who, when, and where). The knowledge learned comprises the strategy, practice, method, or approach, and the wisdom embodies principle, insight, moral or archetype. In its purest form, the paradigm is as follows:

Data > Information > - what, who, when, where, Knowledge > - who, >
Wisdom – why.

For military commanders and those in positions of leadership, what is important is that tacit knowledge is often viewed as the real key to getting things done and creating new value. In other words, commanders can be provided with reams of data, information, and formal tactical and strategic documents, but the outcome of the battle rests with the commander's ability to feel or sense the appropriate decision based on an empirical perception, intuition or personal belief.

Consider the illustration of invited guests who throw out the first pitch at a ball- game. Although they know the distance to home-plate from the pitcher's mound and, in most cases, have observed the ball travel the distance, upon personally throwing the ball, they fall far short.

Therefore, explicit knowledge is not sufficient to carry the ball across the plate. Results require tacit knowledge. In order to understand the complexity of tacit learning, one only needs to research the communication process, a most intricate and expressive model suggests that the process is ever changing. Thus, its inclusion in tacit knowledge portends that any future outcome is contingent on some variables that are outside of explicit knowledge and yet necessary for the result to be achieved or accomplished.

An early model of communication (see Figure 1.) can offer the complexities and the inexhaustible determiners that filter through the process of tacit knowledge.

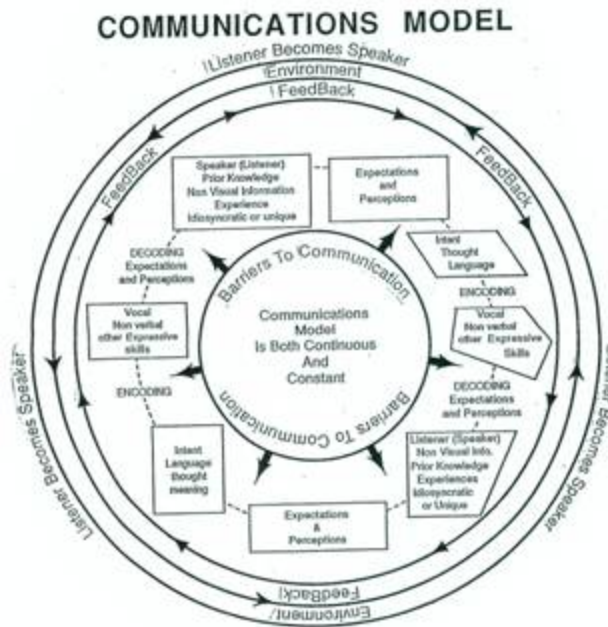


Figure 1: Communication Model

(Georgia State University: A paper on the contrasts and comparisons of paradigmatic features in reading and writing, developed by Fontana 1979)

In the larger picture, what often confuses those unfamiliar with knowledge management is the plethora of definitions for it. We are told that KM is about systems and technologies, about people and learning organizations, about processes, methods and techniques, about managing knowledge assets, and a holistic initiative across the entire organization. In fact, it is all this and then some. Each must find a definition that is suitable and most appropriate for the specificity of the organization.

For the US Army, knowledge management is the art of creating, organizing, applying, and transferring knowledge to facilitate situational understanding and decision-making (FM 6-01). Its application is intended to assist ARFORGEN in increasing readiness, proficiency, and cohesiveness through a cycle of training, ready, and available. Through its pyramid of data, information, knowledge, and understanding, tacit learning and empathetic aspects are intertwined and integrated at each level.

Finally, as important as we think knowledge management is, it is only as good as the material we have to work with as well as those to whom are tasked to perform the myriad of these required activities. If these elements are present, then we can have an impact on performance, on identification of future opportunities, an understanding on current organization weaknesses, a vision and framework for action when applied to strategic development, and better coordination between strategy and technology infrastructure for knowledge sharing.

The ultimate objective of knowledge management is to develop a set of relationships where data, information, knowledge, and wisdom act as an aggregate for providing the objective or result we want. We often hear that “the proof is in the pudding” for such thinking and cognitive practices designed to accomplish what they set out to do. In knowledge management, we look for patterns; these can show as an emergent continuum, and it is through these that we form decisions and develop practices.

Unquestionably, tacit learning and empathy play a significant role throughout and within knowledge management. The future question to be asked is how much, and can we assess it in an exacting manner or weigh its influence?

References

Barclay, R., & Murray P. (eds.). (1997). “What is Knowledge Management?” *Knowledge Praxis*. Retrieved from <http://www.media-access>.

Barnett, R. (2008). For public use Mar. 22, 2009 retrieved from <http://rba3.putblog.com>.

Daniel, E. *Inspirations on Singularity and Opportunities with Empathy*. Retrieved Oct 15, 2009 from <Http://weblogs.asp.net/edaniel/archive>.

Danish Management Board. Part of the Confederation of Danish Industries. (2007). Retrieved from <http://www.dansKManagementtradd.dk/english/home>.

Kakabadse, N., Kakabadse, A. , Kouzmin, A. (2003). *Journal of knowledge Management*.7 (4), 75-91.

United States (2008). Knowledge management section:. Field manual 6-01.1, 1-2.
Washington, DC: Headquarters, Dept. of the Army.

Orr, M., Sankaran, S. (2007). *Mutual empathy, ambiguity, and the implementation of electronic knowledge management within the complex health system*. ECO Vol 9. No. 1-2. 44.

About the Author:

Dr. Roger Fontana has been teaching at Columbus State University since 1989. For the last ten years he has been interested and active in the field of knowledge Management. He often lectures to groups and organizations on the subject of KM. His writings include an extensive article on the impact that empathy has in the administrative Law and Process and his development of Theory W which explores the balance and growth of empathy within organizations.

Dr. Roger Fontana, Columbus State University, 4225 University Ave., Columbus GA 31907; Tel: 706 573-7990; Email: Email: Fontana_Roger@colstate.edu
