

Article: Knowledge Management

The Other Knowledge Management: Lists and Loops

What if current models of knowledge management are like the ancient phrase, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" What if they are only half of what you need to be successful in business... and in life? What if current knowledge management practices are both attractive and needed, and severely limited operating as a standalone? What needs to be added to compliment the "hand" as represented by current knowledge management? What needs to be added to succeed in the upcoming transitions in the new millennium? My suggestion is that you need to add another form (the other hand) of knowledge management. One that is very different than from what is most commonly used today.

The primary use of knowledge management today is comparable to what the first Sears catalogue represented at the turn of the century. It was a revolutionary development then, a necessity today. The documenting of facts, procedures and resources reduces the time and effort needed to retrieve information. Information is readily available so that everyone in the organization can operate with the same facts, i.e. "sing out of the same choir book." The advantage is not merely making those facts available, it's creating a reduction in retrieval time. The goal being to incorporate facts, procedures and resources into real-time decision making and work processes. Management of knowledge, perhaps more appropriately stated as knowledge usage, appears to be inversely related to the time required to access information. The less arduous it is to locate information, the more likely people are to use the knowledge.

You see the present model applied in the e-commerce development of business to business hubs and portals. They are designed to reduce the time needed to determine (to know) "Who are my customers, who are my vendors of choice and how can I reach them now?" Respond.com is a business based on this model. "Respond.com is like an interactive yellow pages..." CEO Will Clemens. In both situations, businesses are reducing the time (and cost) required to uncover the desired information, and in the process making it accessible their organizations to use.

You also see this model at work in the traditional in-house knowledge base. J.D. Edwards "Knowledge Garden" is just such an example. "The idea was to create a digital environment that stored and shared all our products and services - in other words our knowledge base as a company - which in turn would create a community of shared knowledge." Here the emphasis is upon making available (at a reduced retrieval time) to the enquirer a wide array of facts, where sharing information is a basis of knowledge. Both uses of the traditional model for knowledge management have a common process and structure.

- The process is one of shortening the retrieval time to obtain a rapidly expanding universe of knowledge.
- The structure is essentially list based. If we can list every piece of data, then you just need to know where to go on the list to retrieve it.

The other form of knowledge I would like to draw your attention to is structurally a loop or a gestalt, not a list. The manner in which it processes data is as different from the first model as the right side of the brain is from the left. It borrows more from Chaos theory than it does from Newton physics. It is seeing and responding to patterns in the midst of vast changes, not predicting the next reality with exactness. It can be as startling to consider today, as Columbus' belief was to his peers in yet another "New World" 400 years ago. A belief that the earth was round not flat. The structure of a gestalt also suggests that all data within a loop is tied together based upon a common connection to a theme, a pattern, or a goal if you will, and is best referenced in that manner.

The process in this other (hereafter refer to as the 'Loop') model has a similar bent on reducing the speed of information retrieval and processing as does the list model. The focus of this process is quite different, however, as the focus is not on achieving the correct who, what, when and where (list) information. The focus in loops is on obtaining information to be able to make correctional heading changes. Changes that keep an individual and an organization on the shortest possible route to their goal. It answers the questions that begin with the word are, e.g. "Are we doing the right things? Are we headed in the right direction, or on course to get to our destination?" It is a knowledge that is intimately tied to change if the goal is forward reaching. The loop in this perspective looks like an extended spring, with each revolution going further in time or space. However, if the goal is comfort or familiarity, the loop collapses into a two dimensional circle where people and organizations begin repeating the past, maintaining the status quo, resisting change and forward movement in the process.

You see the Loop model reflected in an organization's attempt to ascertain if they are satisfying customers, commonly referred to as "being close to customers." Look at Cisco Systems' CEO's statement, "Successful companies all crash and burn for the same reason or slow down for the same reason; they get too far away from the customers and employees and they lose their ability to move fast." Here distance reduction to customers is describing the underlying process of gathering information on customer satisfaction, and responding with correctional changes, in shorter and shorter time segments.

The most effective implementation of the Loop model of knowledge management closely equates with goal management. It's a knowing framed by the questions "Are we ... or Am I?" versus "What is, Who is, When and Where?" It embodies change and adaptation. It requires having a goal or a destination. It's the knowledge that is critical to navigate successfully towards a goal, understanding that plans will never adequately fully anticipate the environmental shifts and forces encountered in the process of achieving a goal. It's the knowledge that is relied upon when work is a goal managed experience.

The influence of goals upon Loop knowledge management dramatically impacts the outcome. If individuals and organizations are not forward in their goal orientation, if they don't actively manage their loop knowledge, they quickly and defensively become familiar, historical, comfort based. Day-to-day operations will look like a combination of repetition of the tried and true (albeit in perhaps a more efficient manner) and fighting fires. Such individuals and groups are only well suited to the future to the extent it is a replay of the past. In fact without an active knowledge base driving goal management, people and organizations tend to repeat the past, not adapt to the future.

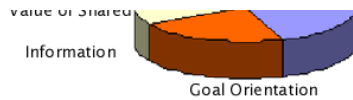
In terms of day to day work experiences, the following matrix articulates how the two forms of knowledge management work:

List Knowledge Management	Loop Knowledge Management
Information structured in lists, where inclusion is defined by categories or characteristics (who, what, when).	Information structured in the form of feedback loops for the purpose of monitoring a course or direction.
Visibility on the status and progress towards a goal is driven by metrics (time, money) and check-off input.	Visibility on the status and progress towards a goal is driven by collaborative updates and process input.
Information and knowledge is provided to cause behavior and decision making to be consistent with a standard across time, group or location.	Information and knowledge is provided to cause behavior and decision making to be goal-centric in the midst of adaptation and variability.
Lack of management results in dis-organization and confusion.	Lack of management results in erratic goal performance.

Loop knowledge management generates much more value, and resistance, when it embodies shared information across a team or work group, not the organization or administration of an individual. The presence of resistance is a tip off to the prompting for change. Loop knowledge management changes the way people work. It invokes a change in work style that is more fundamental than any of the other change initiatives (Just In Time, Process Re-engineering, Downsizing, Continual Improvement...) that have occurred this century. Change equals resistance most of the time. And the reason for that is because change is discomforting for most people unless they are in pain and looking for a release. Seems like it has been that way for humans every since getting kicked out of the garden. The change component, the prompting to address what isn't working, is what makes this form of knowledge management difficult to implement. "But what's the change involved in loop knowledge management?" one might ask.

Working with an active Loop knowledge management system in place forces a number of issues. Let's reference the diagram below to review them:





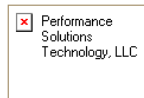
- A consistency in managing information, or **discipline** if you will, is required to keep a knowledge base of value and up-to-date. Consistency is needed both within an individual's work style, and across a work-team to use a knowledge base tool in accordance with a set of standards.
- There is a greater challenge to both think and operate in an **organized** manner; to finish what's started, to document the progress, to respond to to-dos, to recognize contributions.
- There is a strong **value shift** inherent in the use of feedback loops. It ranges from valuing feedback, to valuing collaboration, and along the way incorporates a shift from individual heroics to coordinated teamwork as the preferred work style. At a more basic level, it recognizes the limited value of personal paperwork when contrasted with the value of shared information as applied to the adaptiveness needed to succeed in business.
- Loops work best when tied to a yet as unrealized goal. Visualizing, monitoring and **managing goals** is a substantially different method of working than is common in the current work arena. Most people work from lists, not goals. At an even lower level of organization most people, when overloaded or overwhelmed, resort to fire-fighting, perhaps even prioritized fire-fighting versus an orientation to the question, "What's my/our goal?".
- Finally Loop knowledge management requires individual and organizational leadership. **Leadership** and the commitment to a goal, a vision, the adoption of a new work style because of future pay-offs, is the only effective antidote (other than pain) to overcoming the resistance to change phenomenon. Without effective and enduring leadership, resistance upends consistent behavior and consensus of thought, and ultimately the use of a Loop knowledge base.

The fact that 80% of all new businesses fail within the first 5 years is a haunting statistic on the failure of knowledge management, both List and Loop based. It remains to be seen if individuals and organizations can transition to commonly use both types of knowledge management. Loop knowledge management looks to have far greater returns than the List variety, and correspondingly is more difficult to implement and sustain. It is a shift away from a predominantly linear orientation to the world. A shift away from leveraging predictability to adaptiveness. To accomplish that, the work force will need to develop and utilize work tools that create immediate feedback loops.

ManagePro is just such a program. It emphasizes collaboration, coordination and recognition, over scheduling and precise measurement, as the primary contributors to successful achievement of goals and strategic initiatives. It helps people organize their work effort around goals, and underscores the fact that goals are only valuable to the extent that they are referenced, remain visible... in short are managed.

1. Quote by CEO Will Clemens in "Human Touch," Red Herring, September 1999, p142.
2. Quote by Gerry Coady, director of MIS, "In Touch Profile: J.D. Edwards, Business 2.0, October 1999, insert prior to p49.
3. Quote by CEO John Chambers, John Chambers the Art of the Deal, Business 2.0, October 1999, p114.

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