Good or bad habitus – when employees contravene management directives to foster knowledge sharing

What are the implications of managerial decisions when they run contrary to the norms, values and espoused beliefs of individual employees, and threaten existing relationships within companies? Perceptions and past considerations of individual actors may determine predisposition to engage in knowledge sharing practices, even when this is in direct contravention of managerial directives.

Tensions will arise where organizational directives run contrary to individual beliefs and predispositions, and as such the onus is on organizations. If they wish to avoid such tensions and foster employee commitment, they should devise effective means of ensuring a good fit between management strategies and perceptions of organizational obligations.

Unsanctioned knowledge sharing as deviant employee behaviour

Employees may wish to share knowledge out of friendship and goodwill, but business objectives on the part of the company as a whole may preclude this. This results in a schism, and the resultant deviant employee behaviour in unsanctioned knowledge sharing.

Knowledge sharing is a practice that has become increasingly important to organizations as most are now considered to operate in a “knowledge economy”. This practice not only occurs at the individual level but also at the collective level.

There is a tendency for knowledge sharing to be viewed as indicative of a positive output, but this is not necessarily the case. The possibility exists for conflict owing to both task and relationship dynamics. Conflict outcomes are generally dependent on the nature of the conflict. Relationship conflicts at both intra-group and inter-group levels often result in an adverse affect on employee work climate. The effect of such conflict may not be limited to the instance of occurrence but may be expected to have a temporal effect due to reduced mutual understanding. Task-related conflict may, however, have either negative or positive affect; with the latter outcome being due to the possibility for multiple perspectives in task completion and, as such, giving rise to possibilities for cooperation.

Task-related conflict is not limited to the interpersonal level but also occurs between individuals and organizations as entities. To an extent, this “employee-institution” conflict would be mainly observable from the individual perspective, as the employees are often the unwilling recipients in the communication process. An individual’s normal commitment level may be brought into question as their perceived obligation to the organization runs contrary to the individual's personal disposition and inclination.

A psychological view of commitment is couched in terms of “emotional feeling”, “bond”, “involvement” and “influences”. It is these emotive responses that are
brought to question in the case of employee-institution conflicts, and which may cause individuals to revert to their personal experiences in deciding courses of action. Understanding how individuals react to conflict situations would not only require insight into such individuals' operational context but also, from a knowledge management perspective, be an indication of individual prior knowledge. We can achieve this by examining two distinct concepts:

1. the notion of knowing in practice; and
2. the habitus – which is deemed to play a role in forming individual experience and disposition and, as such, may determine how individuals react to arising tensions.

Managing and sharing knowledge

Arguably, for any organization, the most important aspect of managing knowledge would be the ability to share knowledge, because shared knowledge constitutes a potential asset and there is the possibility for enhanced collective performance through the process. This is particularly so as value creation is linked to organizations being able to articulate and harness both individual and collectively held knowledge within the organization.

An organization's capacity for knowledge sharing is a crucial factor in the ability to generate new knowledge as well as its ability to utilize the resources and capabilities of its members.

Despite the managerialist view of knowledge management in treating knowledge as a transferable object or commodity to be "captured" and stored, research identifies the significance of knowledge as a social phenomenon. The importance of participation in the sharing processes is responsible for the actual creation and sustenance of the value inherent in the knowledge we possess. Any attempt to stifle social interaction affects knowledge sharing practices and, ultimately, organizational performance.

Practice literature identifies “knowing” as logically and chronologically having precedence over knowledge, to which knowing represents epistemic work that is institutionalized in knowledge through practice. In engaging in knowledge-utilizing practices, such as knowledge exchange, training and team-working, individuals would be expected to develop their knowing capability.

Human agency and organizational competency

Human agency plays an essential role in accomplishing knowledgeable work – one in which an organization's competences are not just embodied in human resources but are constantly developed through learning, in daily situated practices. An individual’s capacity for knowing and development of expertise is rooted in engagement in social practices that take into account the actual unfolding of events and the preconceived views and perceptions of how events should play out.

Any limitations to this may result in reduced functionality in the individuals and also reductions in organizational performance.

Because learning is essentially a social process that extends beyond individual action, new knowledge may be acquired by tapping into the knowledge base of others in order to enrich personal knowledge. Learning and sharing processes are acts involving both individual and collective action in an integrative approach for enacting organizational learning and knowledge.

Knowledge sharing can thus be viewed as a practice for enriching individual know-how and, by extension, collective competence. However, as previously indicated
instances of relational conflicts among individuals, as well as between organizations and the employees, may limit this.

The dynamic of the habitus

The notion of the habitus was popularized by Pierre Bourdieu, who described it as a preconditioning law to which agents are exposed in early life. Here, we can understand habitus to mean the working practices that individuals adopt through corporate culture and repetition – their day-to-day working habits.

Given the history of good interactions among individuals, coupled with an established collective identity, the individual habitus of workers developed to recognize the colleagues with whom relationships have been sustained as both companions and veritable assets through which information could be sought. The habitus clearly indicates that this disposition develops over time with subsequent encounters.

Unless actors are exposed to persistent contrary experiences that might change their disposition to one another, they will continue to act in accord with their set dispositions because individual employees are able to recognize the inherent value of their colleagues in terms of knowledge and expertise, and would normally interact with them to tackle problematic issues, even if this is contrary to organizational directive because of the persistent sets of experiences that have become ingrained in the habitus, identifying their colleagues as potential and often requisite sources of knowledge.

Since specific values are reinforced in the habitus of individual actors, irrespective of the organizational directives, the decisions taken by the individuals on whether or not to share their knowledge and expertise become very much dependent on their reflexivity and considerations for sustaining established practices. That is, the individuals would be able to draw from the past, as well as their ongoing experiences with colleagues, to determine the course of action to be taken with regard to knowledge sharing. Because co-workers had favourable past experiences with one another and in certain instances maintained relationships on an ongoing basis, it was possible to contravene the organizational directive due to personal awareness of existing and prospective value inherent in their network of relationships. This is why they would continue to relate with their colleagues, seeking out knowledge as and when required, irrespective of the stance taken by the organization.

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