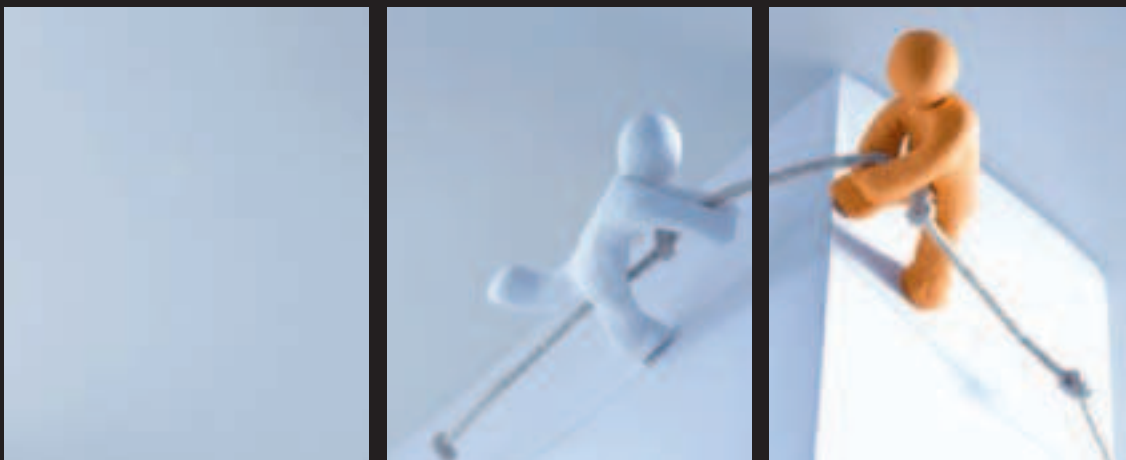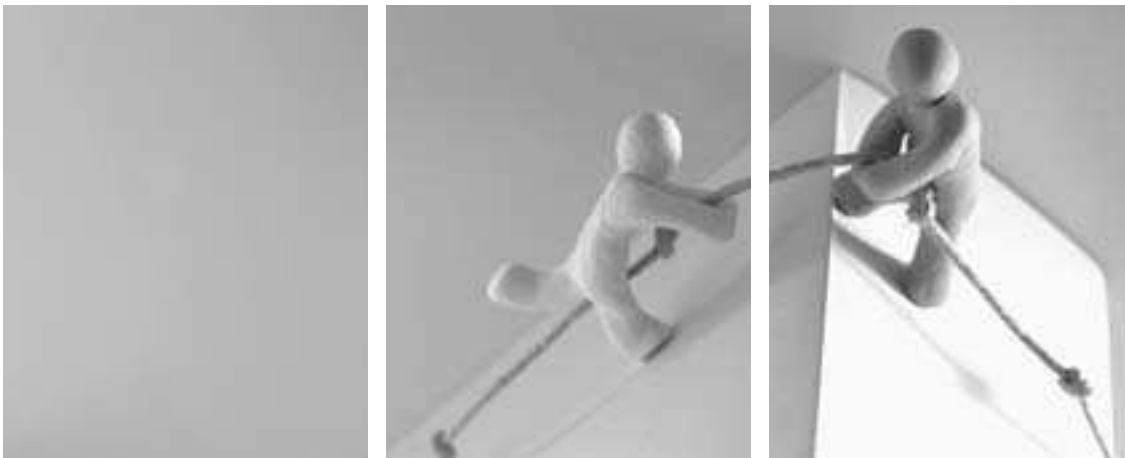# Being a Successful Knowledge Leader: What Knowledge Practitioners Need to Know to Make a Difference

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Executive Summary

SOME ORGANISATIONS have tremendous success with their knowledge-based programmes, while many struggle to demonstrate sustainable benefits from them. The difference between these outcomes is people with knowledge-leadership capabilities. This report explores the experiences, situations, education and behaviours knowledge leaders need to be successful, through twenty capability themes. It guides readers on how to create their own path through a career that will develop their capabilities, then enhance successes fuelled by application of knowledge principles. Great knowledge leaders do not grow on trees, they grow with and within organisations (and sometimes across them). Not just any organisation, only those that have the right fertile environment and strategic future focus of a learning organisation. The prevailing attitude found in these organisations is to invest the time and efforts of the developing leader across a diversity of experiences and engage them to reflect upon these to challenge their perspectives of the outcomes. They enable them to learn from both successes and unexpected failures and how to adapt with the environment to generate a foundation for future successes. Gradually, a new leader emerges, having built strengths across all the capability themes, or at least knowing how to access these through their networks.

Being a successful knowledge leader requires a special set of professional capabilities, behaviours, attitudes and persistence that is developed over time and typically through multiple management disciplines. Acquiring the right mix of experiences and capabilities is difficult, because it involves a wide scope of experiences as well as depth of knowledge. Development of this unusual combination typically involves a significant range of roles and exposure to a diversity of situations, complemented by a great breadth of reading, reflection and active participation in networks.

Many of the comments and concepts in this publication may appear to be stating the obvious and, to some extent, this is true. Leadership around knowledge and learning is not 'rocket science'. It involves application of simple knowledge principles to create value from what is known, while building the capabilities and the environment to foster productivity, competitive advantage and self-sustainability. Too few organisations have incorporated enough of these principles into normal practices to make a difference.

Very few organisations have comprehensive knowledge programmes that ensure best practices are applied across the entire organisation. The nine company case studies in the report highlight that organisations acknowledged as KM leaders, which have many excellent practices, do not necessarily apply them in all parts of the organisation. Knowledge leadership is a journey of continuous improvement and learning. Each stage of development becomes the foundation for next cycle of outcomes for the ever-evolving organisation and the people within it.

Successful knowledge leaders continue to find the opportunities for people to work together and explore concepts and activities that support the desired goals of the business while developing critical capabilities. They create an environment that enables their people to make 'safe-fail' decisions and adopt emergent concepts. They engage people to become involved in learning opportunities around business-aligned projects. Participation in these knowledge-rich interactions builds capabilities and networks in a way the employees at all levels feel they belong to something significant and their efforts are valued. They harvest the benefits as they grow and share them with their stakeholders. Successful knowledge leaders make a difference by generating positive growth for the future, living their beliefs and being true to their values. They collaborate with others, applying what they know to create value that is manifested as productivity, innovation, continuous improvement and developing their successors as the next generation of knowledge leaders.

Mahatma Gandhi said it well: "We must become the change we want to see."

Introduction

SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE in knowledge professions understand that delivering value from knowledge is primarily about people and their interactions.

People interacting with other people to help, advise and collaborate; people getting together to tell stories, share ideas and discover mutual benefits through the principles of reciprocity; people mentoring and conversing with other people, to create better processes, innovate around opportunities, solve intractable problems and implement solutions. Through helping others, 'knowledge people' build trusting relationships and make a difference for themselves, their colleagues and networks and their organisation as a whole. On some occasions, the collaborative activities of knowledge thought leaders make a difference much beyond their organisation, as is occurring with the environmental movement. Knowledge leaders and knowledge workers proactively leverage their ever-extending networks to make better quality decisions, improve outcomes, learn together and even avoid pitfalls they did not know were possible, before serendipitous conversations spontaneously emerged.

There is no doubt that sharing knowledge and collaborating to apply knowledge has the potential to generate value. A question for many organisations is how to do this effectively to optimise return on investment. While some organisations have created significant value through knowledge-based programmes, many have struggled to reach the potential they believe should be there. Part of the problem is the inability to define specific tangible benefits in detail in advance of the programme. Another reason is a lack of confidence or trust that these benefits will be realised, and underestimating the value of intangible benefits. The inability to predefine specific benefits reduces executive support, which in turn becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy of failure. In a complex world, it is not possible to know the exact details of outcomes in advance. Generic benefit categories can be stated, but setting a rigid plan to deliver specific measures is fraught with risk and could exclude the emergence of unknown opportunities.

Successful knowledge leaders understand that acting in a complex world influences what emerges and that the actions themselves become an inherent part of the outcomes and learnings. Creation and application of knowledge flows involve stimulating interactions between the environment, the participants and a wide range of inputs and outputs (refer to page 112, Figure 1). Such flows occur whether they are deliberately managed or not, but the outcomes can be enhanced with well-directed leadership. Successful leaders know how to stimulate the positive trends and to disturb the undesirable trends to drive the direction of the environment, rather than being driven by it.

Interactions between knowledgeable people generate emergent outcomes that cannot be reliably predicted and may not

be repeatable. Emergent concepts provide opportunities, but harbour inherent risks because they are untested. Management often preclude approval of initiatives with this degree of uncertainty as they are not prepared to support 'risky projects.' Knowledge leaders who have strong relationships with senior executives can influence them to support pilot programmes around emergent concepts. Those that generate success with measurable benefits build confidence and secure the additional support necessary to extend the programme. As progress towards desired long-term goals continues to be achieved, new possibilities emerge which challenge priorities. This triggers the adjustment of goals and the programme continues to evolve. Such are the beginnings of many knowledge-based programs. While they continue to generate benefits and communicate their worth to stakeholders, they survive. However, without a consistent flow of benefits their support and the program slowly fade away.

One problemme is over-promising delivery of benefits in order to get initial support. When predefined early benefits are not quickly realised, support is rapidly withdrawn. Knowledge-based programmes usually involve cultural elements and these inevitably take years to achieve. Some programmes sold as knowledge projects appear simple and quick, but are often more complex than assumed. For example, implementation of new software usually requires procedural and behavioural change to be successful. The software is successfully made available, but without the necessary cultural and procedural changes, it will not be used as planned and the desired benefits are not realised. When the tools and short-term benefits are the focus rather than people, relationships and long-term benefits, the programme is at risk of failure. Situations

in which a defined path is appropriate do exist in a simple, unchanging environment. However, these situations are becoming less common as the pace of change in our modern world is rapidly accelerating. This is where the success can be drawn from the brink of failure with the right leadership capabilities. An adaptable and influential leader can find a balance of initiatives that generates sufficient short-term benefits to placate stakeholders, while building a foundation for long-term capability developments. They build the knowledge strategy to enhance performance and align with organisational goals, rather than to achieve isolated knowledge objectives.

Successful leaders are sometimes described as either lucky or naturally talented. No doubt everyone has benefited from some good luck at times and perhaps from some bad luck at unfortunate moments. However, sustained success over time is not the outcome of random criteria – there is more to their success than this. One of the common features of a successful knowledge leader is to have a wide scope of life experiences and a mixed history of professional interests. Many end up in knowledge management as a result of these capabilities rather than being deliberately developed for the role. Imagine if the essence of these capabilities was combined into a development programme that specifically targeted knowledge leaders. Would it be possible to create specialist knowledge leaders through a targeted programme incorporating these essential capabilities? Would such programmes be useful for managers and leaders generally? Do we want specialist 'knowledge leaders' or do we want all leaders to proactively use knowledge to lead more effectively? Some thoughts on these questions are offered in this publication.

Successful knowledge professionals generate productivity and innovation through engaging resources in productive activities. They adeptly balance their approach between facilitative and directive to convince stakeholders to invest resource time in their activities. They innately know which style is appropriate to influence each stakeholder and when to apply it to stimulate interest and investment in knowledge programmes. They encourage experimentation amongst adaptable people and facilitate interactions in a stimulating environment. Whilst coordinating these activities they harvest value from the interactions through knowledge-success cycles. The benefits from these investments are communicated back to the stakeholders in a way that motivates them to reinvest in the knowledge programme and the success cycles continue. Knowledge-success cycles become more efficient and effective by deploying innovative support tools and processes to generate further outcomes and through stewarding appropriate relationships. The leader aligns team motivation and behaviour with the goals of the sponsoring parties to ensure their desired outcomes remain targets of invested effort.

The proposition that making a difference through knowledge management is influenced more by people than other criteria stimulates some questions useful for debate:

- Why are some people better at this than others?
- How do we find the more capable people and motivate them to generate the biggest impacts from applying knowledge management principles?
- Is it possible to develop any person to be a successful knowledge leader?
- How could you develop the capabilities of your people to become better at leading knowledge-based initiatives?

- What capabilities are critical for a person to be successful and how do people come to acquire these?

This research focuses on organisations that have demonstrated successes through developing the capabilities of their knowledge professionals and investigates the role of people capabilities in how this was achieved. While it is not usually possible to simply reapply these learnings in other organisations, understanding how others have achieved success helps to assess what can be done in other organisations and contexts.

A key objective of this book is to provide a guide for knowledge practitioners, knowledge initiative leaders and those interested in capability development, with a pragmatic assessment of priority capabilities useful for knowledge related contexts. Understanding and applying the capabilities summarised in this book will assist you on your journey towards being a successful knowledge leader by sharing with you, what knowledge practitioners need to know to make a difference.

Knowledge comets, meteors and meteorites

Knowledge programmes can be like comets, in that people are excited to see them and many get excited about them. However, despite the excitement, and this beautiful mysterious object being held in awe, many intuitively understand it is something that will gently pass by with little impact. Then, sometime in the distant future, when we had almost completely forgotten about it, it returns again to briefly inspire us. We would love to know more about this mystical heavenly object. It fascinates us in a strange, comforting way and we are glad it is there, but we just do not quite get the relevance of how it will impact us in any way. A common

sentiment seems to prevail: *as long as it does not interfere with my plans, I am happy to take a little time out to observe it pass by.* It provides a little curiosity, brightens one's outlook for a short period and provides a topic for idle social chats over coffee. A short interlude to contemplate things bigger than our immediate world (or cubicle perhaps) before we rush back to yesterday's overdue milestones.

Some may invest a little time to understand the basic structure of the comet, although we do not really know why, there does not seem to be any immediate benefit in knowing such trivia. It seems there is this mini mass hysteria in the community about it and they got caught up in it for a while (always knowing of course, that this is a temporary distraction that will soon traverse the attention span of colleagues and as such offers no threat). An interesting aside for a while, now what is next…

Some knowledge initiatives are more like meteors than comets, in that they come closer to our small world. They enter the Earth's gravitational pull from out of the darkness, with great speed and a flash of bright light; they hurtle towards us in a vain attempt to change the face of our world. However, they do not have the mass and momentum to make an impact on the Earth, whose own mass, momentum, and atmosphere simply burn out the meteor and relegate it to vapour and dust before it can make any impact. Again, people are excited to see the brief display and they chat about how cool it was to watch, but few ever engage directly with it in any way. Generally they read about it in newsletters and remain in their comfort zone with the knowledge that meteors are harmless and will not impact them. The protective atmosphere around them will always prevent such a small object (programme) from making any real mark on

their world and they remain comfortable in the knowledge that no sustainable change will be generated.

What if knowledge initiatives were more like meteorites? What if they descended from the heights with a great fanfare and brilliance and impacted Earth, creating a permanent change? Perhaps even rocking it sufficiently to change its path or environment? The first image that comes to mind with such a scenario is total disaster! We fear uncontrolled mayhem and mass destruction of the world as we know it. Although this is the most probable outcome with an uncontrolled large meteorite, it is not the only possible outcome. There are small meteorites that make it to the Earth's surface with only a minor impact, as they are so diminished by the time they land. However, there are options between these extremes that offer benefits for knowledge programmes.

From a knowledge initiative perspective, the desired outcome is a manageable compromise between these possibilities. One where the meteorite makes a huge and exciting display as it descends in a controlled manner to make an impact, but generates a productive change rather than being a random destructive force. Imagine creating a programme that divides the meteorite mass into smaller controllable pieces, each generating their own display and impact; a constant shower of meteorites that collectively generate greater awareness, and each making a small positive difference. With time, the collective differences of these impacts become significant. People can't help noticing these numerous displays over a longer period and observing outcomes on an ongoing basis. They realise this is not one big (potentially disastrous) impact they cannot control, but a series of useful positive contributions, which assist them to change the environment over time. They become

more aware of the next event and what it will do. They want to be part of the action as it happens. They start looking forward to the bright displays and impacts and prepare for the benefits they will deliver. A meteorite shower [a series of small success stories from knowledge-based initiatives] helps to generate the right balance of awareness, anticipation and focus on outcomes and benefits, while reducing fear of change.

Describing desired changes in advance helps people to engage with the knowledge programme and should be communicated in a targeted way. However, it is essential to provide some flexibility in outcomes to enable emergent ideas to mature. This also provides the adaptability to take advantage of innovation opportunities and reflective learning throughout the 'meteorite shower'. One of the most significant advantages of an aligned but flexible programme, like a meteorite shower, is the ability to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities (and preparedness to manage unpredicted negative outcomes). Ideally, stakeholders will build a sense of comfort and confidence over time, without exerting unreasonable control. This represents a type of unpredictable predictability, in which you understand the overall directions and outcomes, but not the specific details or exact timing of each future event or output.

Another advantage of the meteorite shower approach is to spread investment across a range of smaller activities and start to generate some outcomes earlier. Rather than investing all resources in one big impact, a number of smaller (more manageable and better-scheduled) meteorites each creating separate, but aligned, impacts provides more opportunities to create both planned and unpredictable benefits. These can engage a wider audience and stakeholders get to see an ongoing light show (positive awareness programme) and a series of positive impacts (success stories) over time. They start to expect to an ongoing programme of light shows and impacts and begin to participate more positively in them. With continued investment over time, a self-sustaining programme is created that becomes part of the way the organisation operates and which delivers continuous improvements in communication, profitability, creativity, innovation and ultimately organisational performance.

Building capabilities

Building capabilities is a multi-faceted journey, not a single event. The more diverse the experiences and events in the journey, the stronger the capabilities generated. Capability is further enhanced if each experience is reflected upon as a learning opportunity and discussed with others to hear different perspectives and interpretations. Without reflecting, it is possible to simply breeze through life, learn little and never build greater capabilities. For reflective practitioners, everything they do, read, participate in or watch provides the opportunity to improve their capabilities. For them, life itself is a series of learning activities, whether they are personal, professional or social. Is it just the way they are? Alternatively, have they actively taken decisions to be this way?

It is easy to confuse capability with capacity as many people use the terms interchangeably. *The Oxford Dictionary* defines 'capability' with words like 'ability', 'fitness', 'power' or 'faculty'. It reflects having the necessary skills and competencies to perform an act or deliver to a standard. The Oxford defines 'capacity' using phrases and words such as the power to receive or contain, cubic content, function or character. By these definitions, both capability and

capacity are important in knowledge programmes. It is essential to build the capability (competency, knowledge, fitness and faculty) of your resources, but also to have the capacity (volume and content) of resources to be able to deliver outputs and outcomes within the timeframes required.

Typical errors in generating knowledge strategies are to build in what you have the capability of doing, but not the capacity, or *vice versa*. Both problems create unreasonable expectations about what benefits can be delivered and when they will be realised. For the purposes of this report, think about capability as being what you have the ability or competency to do, and capacity as the level of resources you have to deliver within the planned timeframes. Organisations have inherent capacities and some of these can be increased through automation. However, the capabilities of an organisation is usually far more dependent on the knowledge and experience levels of the people the organisation has influence over. Capability is a design and development issue. Capacity is a prioritisation and resource availability issue. Both can be supplemented by outsourcing. However, outsourcing capabilities creates knowledge issues and risks in the long term that outsourcing capacity usually does not.

Capability and capacity can be applied to people, processes or tools. A person can be made more capable by educating them or providing them with some challenging experiences. Their capacity can be increased by enhancing their physical fitness so they can achieve more physical work in a given time. A portal can be made more capable by configuring additional software options, such as enabling wiki or blog functionality. The portal capacity can be increased by increasing the bandwidth of the intranet network or by adding storage space to the

servers. A document-management process can be more capable of generating quality report outcomes by embedding a peer-review step before documents are loaded. The capacity of this same process can be increased by spreading the review workload across a larger group of experts or passing responsibility for the review process to a community of experts.

This book focuses on people capabilities. In this context, the competencies, skills and behaviours that enable an individual, group or organisation to deliver an activity, output or outcome. It explores what capabilities are significant to knowledge-based programmes, how they can continue to be developed over time and why this is important.

Context

The purpose of this book is to provide a guide for those wishing to make a difference, by becoming more capable of leading organisational initiatives through better leverage of knowledge. Without some context, the messages, intent or processes contained here may be misunderstood or misinterpreted. Some people are always happy to argue *ad infinitum* about some terms and definitions just for the sake of argument. For this reason, the author has minimised the inclusion of definitions, especially as there is a vast volume of different opinions in the literature and plenty of debate in online forums, blogs and wikis about the terms used in this book. Interpretation is left to the reader within their context and experiences. It would be impossible to include all perspectives and be presumptuous enough to provide a personal definition as this would just add fuel to the debate and distract readers form the purpose of the book. There are plenty of opportunities to participate in such debates (if one is inclined) and as such this book does not attempt to cover them here.

Despite the statement above, it is useful to have some context for the reader to interpret the information in the way it is intended, for the sake of clarity. Some points of clarification to reinforce a specific context have been provided where this is deemed to be useful. This does not suppose there is only one way to interpret this information, as it will be used in different ways by different people. The author is interested to hear other perspectives of how this information can be applied, where it can be improved from a practical perspective. Such constructive dialogue is an essential interaction for learning and building capability, so the book can contribute to these, but is not intended to answer them.

A useful operational guideline for a knowledge practitioner is:

What can be done to create value by leveraging what is collectively known to collaboratively create new foundations for future opportunities?

This keeps the scope broad and flexible and requires decisions and actions, as well as interactions between people to apply knowledge to create improvements for the future. Although we need to learn from the past, we should not be preoccupied by it as the future context limits what is directly applicable. Comprehensive programmes involve creating new knowledge as well as reusing existing knowledge, increasing the capabilities of people, improving infrastructure and tools and defining better practice processes by embedding knowledge principles in them. Ultimately, a successful knowledge leader will select priority areas based on what most effectively builds productive relationships and generates a balance of medium and long-term benefits, both tangible and intangible. As benefits begin to flow, so does the credibility of the programme and the level of support and participation. Without a flow of benefits, the programme slowly loses momentum and people migrate their mind space towards programmes from which they receive a greater return for the investment of their time and efforts.