Creating a Knowledge Sharing Culture

Important lessons for organizations today.

By Jeff Hanan and Jeff Stemke

Today, 10,000 Baby Boomers reached retirement age in the U.S.

On average, they have 35 years of experience each. Tomorrow, it happens again, and the day after, until 2030. That means that every day several hundred thousand years of experience just left the workforce.

Given the influx of younger workers who increasingly job hop, not only are companies losing seasoned veterans but they may not be building a stable core to replace them.

I've seen different variations of the above perfect storm warning and, while provocative, I've not heard of many organizations making a serious effort to do something about it. And that makes me wonder. Are they seeing this "talent cliff" issue as HR fluff, something not really requiring a serious response? Is it that they are unsure about how to approach this in a manageable, practical way? Are they unwilling to spend the money (time, people, support)? Or are they distracted with all the other issues confronting organizations today that this "potential issue" gets pushed to the "not urgent" side of the prioritization grid. Our experience suggests a combination of all these issues exists at various levels in many organizations.

Given that employee knowledge, skills and experience represent an organization's competitive advantage, it seems like knowledge sharing across organizational stakeholders would be critical to innovation, continuous improvement, and profitable business growth. Yet knowledge sharing is often viewed and implemented with ineffective informal structures, systems and processes.

Generating the desired business value from knowledge capture, transfer and retention takes a more structured approach. There are many practical and proven methods to accomplish this. Many companies are finding that one of the most effective ways is through formal networks of people working on common practices or disciplines.

Peter Senge, author of <u>The Fifth Discipline</u>, believes value is created by teams and networks of people learning through social networks.

Jeff Stemke, now a Patina Professional at Patina Solutions, previously helped Chevron create structured, well-organized knowledge sharing networks that provide numerous tangible examples of the value of such methods. Some of these networks started as project teams that created knowledge sharing and sustaining networks as part of their deployment process. These networks were chartered to:

• Provide rapid connection of people with questions to people with relevant knowledge and expertise
• Enable and accelerate efficient sharing and adoption of promising practices and new technologies
• Reduce the likelihood for repetition of mistakes
• Provide a link to internal and external information sources such as databases, previous studies and benchmarking data
• Enhance the culture of knowledge sharing and retention within Chevron

A significant process tool in the network concept was a rapid knowledge sharing method of time-sensitive lessons,learned, which ultimately saved the company millions.

Here's a specific example that Jeff shared. "One of our business units (BU) received an incident report from a partner operating an oil field. While completing a well, a service contractor was preparing a perforating gun, which is used to shoot holes in the well casing to allow for gas production. An electrical problem caused the gun to fire prematurely, resulting in significant damage to the well. Immediately, three people in the BU entered the report into both the Drilling and Completions and the Formation Evaluation email networks. Several hundred operating and technical staff received the report, including two well logging specialists. Aware that the same type of job was planned at another location, the logging specialists contacted an employee at that unit who stopped the perforating operation and did not reschedule the work until his team could address all issues. It took just four days between the incident and the report being used half a world away and potentially saved $30 million."

As Jeff shared other similar examples of how Chevron effectively deployed knowledge sharing networks to achieve operational excellence outcomes, it resonated with me that this company successfully brought together people, process and technology components in a holistic manner. And, just as important, Chevron smartly focused on evolving its culture, to assure the beliefs and behaviors of its workforce were aligned with this approach.

These are important lessons for organizations today to apply in their knowledge sharing and transformation efforts.

Unfortunately, as experience walks out the door for good every day, organizations are likely to struggle in transforming their operations to achieve and sustain success. Some common challenges regularly experienced by organizations include:

- No sense of urgency (one of John Kotter's favorites). This is the same as lack of a burning platform tied to business impact
- Ineffective or absent management sponsorship and support
- Lack of funding
- Organizational culture non-conducive to knowledge sharing
- Poor communication and information-sharing discipline
- Locations/distances between groups
- Lack of technology support/resources
- Absence of incentives
- Personal job security

In an article for the Association for Manufacturing Excellence on Knowledge Networks and Organizational Excellence (reference), Jeff discussed critical success factors of his network approach at Chevron. These factors appear to address a number of the challenges discussed earlier. They include:

- Clarity on a strategic business goal, and the expected business value to be derived from effective sharing
- Management sponsorship and support (management initially identified the need for the networks and continues to champion them)
- Funding for time spent by the network moderator and core team experts was justified since these networks supported a strategic business goal and often had specific, long-range deliverables
- Network members were selected by their local management with an expectation to make participation a part of their job
- The networks adapted readily available and inexpensive corporate web tools to facilitate collaboration and sharing

So how can your organization effectively capture, share and smartly use knowledge across various segments of your workforce? A logical first step is to identify the critical knowledge your company needs to support its business. Specific instances where knowledge,transfer or lack thereof, impaired achieving results or spent money wastefully are potent arguments to build leadership engagement. Most organizations, unfortunately, have a list of these examples. For each example, it's useful to assess the current and desired states of knowledge sharing and reuse, considering structures, processes, systems, people skills and culture. The gap analysis forms the basis of your plan to create a knowledge sharing culture. **LE**

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