



Fostering Creativity: Effective Communication & Knowledge Management

By Sandy Chong & Felix Müller-Wienbergen

Innovation lies at the heart of successful companies, particularly those operating in the creative or high technology sectors. Businesses could distinguish themselves by their capacity to innovate constantly, which is guided by the development of new technologies, process improvements, and lastly, the *creation* and *management* of knowledge. The creation and management of knowledge, unfortunately, do not happen spontaneously. Certainly, companies should start by hiring the right people, i.e. those with high creative potential. However, the real challenge lies in managing people and teams, in such a way that their creative potential would be fully unleashed, and then utilised for the greater success of the company. The above task is challenging, no doubt, which therefore calls for the *creation* and *management* of knowledge to be the focus (though not only) of any innovative organisation.



The key to innovation: knowledge management & effective communication

In the early 1990s, “knowledge management” (KM) gained widespread acceptance as an integral process within an organization. It was Japanese organizational theorist, Ikujiro Nonaka, who provoked the Western business community to rethink their otherwise narrow perception of knowledge. In a nutshell, he advocated the additional use of *tacit* knowledge - the often “highly subjective insights, intuitions, and ideals of employees” - to enhance organizational value.¹ There are now many definitions of KM, but the emphasis is on the creation, embodiment, dissemination and utilization of tacit knowledge. Having good KM practices has been shown to nurture innovation and produce unrivaled competitive advantages, which explains why many of today’s top business leaders to jump onto the bandwagon, implementing KM strategies into their corporations.

Information retrieval systems, a technical KM tool, are designed to provide organization-wide access to the pool of

organizational knowledge. This is especially useful for nurturing team innovation - an irrefutable must to remain competitive; such systems have the power to integrate the diverse knowledge, ideas and perspectives from respective individuals in a creative organization.

Yet, while the effects of good KM practices are undeniable, empirical studies have revealed that a large proportion of KM implementations will fail. Through all the research that has emerged, it seems that most failures were fueled by the lack of communication within the organization.

Tacit knowledge is generally difficult to articulate unless done so in its context - it is precisely because of such a difficulty that makes tacit knowledge a valuable asset to an organization. Effective communication, therefore, is a key element of knowledge management. Communication facilitates the sharing of knowledge; it is the ‘nervous system’ that ensures organization cohesiveness, coordinated work efforts and it also creates a social environment that stimulates creative thinking. In essence, effective communication allows an environment where ideas can be effectively accessed, reproduced, improved or expanded.

Notes:

1. Nonaka, I. (1991). The knowledge creating company. *Harvard Business Review*, 69, 96-104.



Ensure alignment of goals

A well-communicated strategy produces strong alignment - which is crucial to creativity. Here, alignment refers to a common goal in which everyone in the organization is investing. To achieve "alignment" in an organization, research has shown that two elements are crucial: a communication spiral, and lateral collaboration.

Communication Spiral. Higher management must take a positive attitude towards communicating with their subordinates; it is also helpful to employ a participative management style, where employees are

encouraged to contribute ideas, without fear of being judged. In the same vein, superiors must be willing to receive feedback and they should provide opportunities for subordinates to set goals.

Lateral Collaboration. The cross-pollination of ideas and the sharing of knowledge within the organization are crucial contributors to achieving alignment, especially where creative work is concerned. Rather than having an excessively-competitive spirit, employees should be encouraged to find interest in the work of others in order for information to flow freely.





Nurture creativity using a variety of communication tools

According to researchers, creativity in a team can only emerge, if *all* participants are actively taking part in the communication process; as a result, every member can then add value to the creative team's knowledge base.

The process of creative work often involves ad-hoc communication - which necessitates the use of informal modes of communication in addition to formal modes. Unsurprisingly, the latter is commonly found unsuitable for the transfer of creative ideas.

For example, where face-to-face interaction is geographically inconvenient at the moment of need, videoconferencing and even online chat, though unconventional, are useful alternatives. Employees are able to jointly develop and exchange

ideas, resolve misunderstandings and coordinate efforts without delay.

This is not to say that traditional writing media (email, fax or letter) has not its benefits. As these asynchronous communication modes may last for minutes or up to weeks, respondents are given ample opportunities to reflect upon the message's contents and hence craft their most creative response to the most complex problems. Traditional media is also, by nature, impersonal - which lessens the fear of disagreeing and the need to conform to group norms.

The following page provides details of some of the synchronous and asynchronous tools that managers can make use of in the workplace.

Synchronous communication tools

Synchronous tools allow people to connect at the same time, regardless of location. While they bridge the gap created by distance, scheduling problems prompted by time-zone differences may arise. In addition, costly tools are required to make this possible.

Tool	Uses	Drawbacks
Video & audio web conferencing	Group dialogue, share visual information, build instantaneous rapport, bridge distances	Costly
Instant messaging and online chat	Sharing of non-complex information, ad-hoc communication	Only for one-to-one interactions, unsuitable for complex problems
White-boarding or online application sharing	Joint development of ideas	Costly, requires compatible technology

Asynchronous communication tools

Asynchronous tools allow people to connect their own convenience, regardless of time zones and locations. Users are given ample time to put in their best response, and conversation histories are also captured by the technology. However, such tools are impersonal, and often require users to proactively engage themselves.

Tool	Uses	Drawbacks
Mail, e-mail, fax	Group dialogue, sharing resources	Misinterpretations, information overload, overcrowding inbox
Discussion blogs, forums or boards	Open discussions, sharing ideas and comments	Long time needed to arrive at conclusions
Audio & video clips	For instructions or teaching	One-way communication only

Optimize your team's creative potential

Today, innovative organizations often find themselves consumed by the pressures of staying creative, yet needing to collect, store, organize, synthesize and understand vast amounts of information and ideas in order to maintain their competitive advantage. Employing effective communication strategies has inadvertently become an integral part of the knowledge management process which supports creativity. While managers contemplate these issues, it is also important to note that modes of communication must be kept flexible so as to optimize the team's creative potential. ■

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