



October 2016

Knowledge Management Leadership



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This newsletter is dedicated to the issue of Knowledge Management and Leadership, and how the two are linked. We look at how leaders can help or hinder KM, as well as ways of winning their support and making the most of it when you've won it!



Rupert Lescott,
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To support knowledge management, organisations need to develop a culture of honesty and an absence of defensive behaviour. In this newsletter we will examine the role leadership plays in encouraging this culture, using examples from the military and commercial sectors.

We conclude with some practical suggestions on how KM tools and approaches can reveal and help shape an organisation's leadership styles and overall culture.

How does leadership affect KM?

Leaders can exert great influence over those that report to them. If 'the Boss' thinks knowledge management is important, then it becomes important for everyone else as well. On the other hand, if they repeatedly miss knowledge management meetings, then others will draw the natural conclusion that knowledge management doesn't actually matter so much.

Indeed, our [2014 KM survey](#) showed that the top barrier to KM success was 'lack of prioritisation and support from leadership' whilst

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the top 'enabler' was *'support from senior management'*.

Leaders therefore have a genuine responsibility when it comes to getting their organisations to manage knowledge. If they wish to encourage self-criticism and honesty from those that they lead (in order to enable learning), then they have to demonstrate their own willingness to admit mistakes. Some fear this will make them appear vulnerable or weak. In our experience, such fears are unfounded.

Understanding the way leadership is helping or harming your KM initiatives is vital and Knoco can help here through our [cultural audit service](#), which provides an insight into 'what its like to work around here' and how this is affected by leadership, for good or bad.

Examples of good & bad KM leadership

In 2011, whilst working for the British Army's Lessons Exploitation Centre, I attended a Peer Assist during which one Commanding Officer spoke of some of the mistakes he had personally made.

One particular operation that he had planned, involving 300 soldiers, was undone by "2 guys with a moped, an AK-47 and a mobile phone", riding past and scaring the population; a possibility he had completely missed.

This episode taught him much, and his willingness to share and learn from his mistakes enabled those of us in the audience to benefit as well. No-one thought any worse of him for this - rather, we respected him all the more for it.

By contrast, another briefing from a Brigade Commander concluded with a set of lessons, of which the final one was, "*Be a learning organisation.*" Given that much of his talk had consisted of telling us what a great job he and his colleagues had done, I decided to test this by asking, "*What mistakes did you make on your tour, if any, and what did you learn from them?*"

His reply was "*Hmm...I didn't come prepared for that one... Can I come back to you? Right, next question...*"

Afterwards, I went up to him, apologising for putting him on the spot. He was gracious and conceded that it was an excellent question and he should have been prepared for it. Given that the audience included a Government minister, several generals and around 1000 people, I said, "*When someone of your rank, in front of this kind of audience, is able to answer that question honestly. then*

we can call ourselves a learning organisation.”

So which of these two styles of leadership do your leaders follow? Do they publically admit mistakes so others can learn, or do they only talk about their successes? Knoco can help leaders understand how their behaviour affects the KM culture through our [KM Awareness workshops](#).

Managing leaders in lessons capture meetings

One of the situations where leadership behaviour can impact Knowledge Management very directly, is in project lessons capture meetings. We recommend these meetings are always externally facilitated, but still the behaviour of the leader can positively or negatively affect the success of the meeting.

I remember one lessons capture meeting which the particular project manager dominated completely. People were clearly intimidated by him and offered nothing like the same frank insights into how the project had been managed and executed that they had earlier provided to me over the phone. This meeting required very careful facilitation.

However, we're not all like that and some of the best leaders I have met through lessons facilitation welcome everyone to the workshop and then leave before substantive discussions begin, returning for a summary at the end of the session. This ensures everyone turns up as well, because they know The Boss will be there and it doesn't stifle discussion.

If the leader needs to take part throughout the conversation, then it is good practice for the facilitator to talk with the leader in advance, and agree some ground rules. I often say to the leader that "if we are to get good quality lessons, then it is important that you set the tone of openness and willingness to explore mistakes. Can I ask you, early in the meeting, to "own up" to a mistake you personally made? If others see you do this, then they will open up as well".

Contact Knoco for [training](#) in lessons capture facilitation, or for [external facilitation services](#).

How to win leaders' support

You can win the support of senior leaders for KM by making a strong business case. You need to work out the 'size of the prize' – i.e. the value of the gain to be achieved through KM initiatives. or the size of

the costs currently being incurred in their absence (what we call the Cost of Lost Knowledge).

You will need to do a lot of research to work out this cost, looking for examples of:

- repeat mistakes, and how much they cost in terms of time and/or money;
- schedule over-runs as a result of re-inventing rather than re-using knowledge;
- operational units operating below the internal benchmark level, through lack of knowledge transfer from the best performing units;
- the lost value from missed bids, which better access to knowledge might have secured;
- the time new-joiners take to reach a level of competence; or
- the risk of knowledge loss through the retirement of experts.

We use a technique called benefits mapping to track KM interventions through to these measurable outcomes. A conservative estimate of the impact that KM can have on these figures will probably produce numbers which are large enough to get the senior managers' attention.

If you can show that KM can support their initiatives, address some of their pain points and deliver far more value than it costs, then the senior managers will be on your side.

[Contact Knoco](#) for help in developing your organisation's business case for KM.

The power of the CEO video

Where leadership support has been won, you need to exploit it for all it is worth. One good idea is to get 'talking heads' videos of the key leaders in your organisation, endorsing KM and explaining its benefits to the organisation in general, and to the knowledge workers.

Part of your Knowledge Management strategy should be to create a Knowledge Management vision, and then you can record the CEO explaining the vision and why it is important. A short video such as this can be used in internal presentations, and placed on the KM web-page.

Then when you start your KM piloting, you can create a similar video from the manager of the pilot departments. As we said earlier, what interests the Boss interests their staff as well. Use these videos as a way to show that the Boss is interested in Knowledge Management.

[Contact Knoco](#) for advice on your KM communications strategy.

KM tools to deliver good leadership

Organisations can use a number of tools to help them understand and reflect the importance of positive KM leadership, all of which Knoco can help you with:

[Cultural audits and surveys](#) – these can help reveal an organisation's culture, as well as the drivers behind it. Interventions can then be designed to help shift the culture towards greater openness, collaboration and learning;

[Left-hand column exercise](#) – the difficulties of saying what we really think are revealed in this simple yet powerful exercise which, as part of a workshop, can help participants identify and tackle their own barriers to learning;

[KM valuation](#) and business case development as part of a [KM strategy](#) – through these practical measures, knowledge managers can build support and enthusiasm for KM initiatives, by working out the 'size of the prize' and setting a clear direction towards achieving such goals;

[KM coaching](#) and [training](#) – one-to-one partnership with senior leaders, or group training sessions for middle and junior managers both ensure that KM implementation proceeds with close alignment of aims and methods of delivery.

News from Knoco

Some updates from across the Knoco family:

Ewa Stelmaszek of [Knoco Poland](#) has just produced a great infographic that sets out [the key elements of a KM framework](#).

Javier Martinez of [Knoco Chile](#) will be speaking about "retaining knowledge" at a corporate university seminar in Madrid (Spain) October 27th hosted by UOC and Repsol and the next day (October 28th) will be speaking at [the "Intergeneration KM" seminar](#) in San Sebastian (Spain) hosted by IVAP and EIPA.

Stephanie Barnes has started [a KM Meetup Group in Berlin](#).

Martin Chen of [Knoco China](#), recently worked with Nick Milton to deliver some KM training with a manufacturing company in China. Discussions are now underway on how Knoco China can continue to support their plans to implement KM.

Nick Milton is running an open access KM training course in London in November. [Contact Nick](#) for details

Rupert Lescott recently flew to Abu Dhabi to meet with a prospective client (a government organisation) and discuss how Knoco can help them implement KM. We await their request for a proposal. He has also recently talked about Leadership and Learning Organisations as part of the [British Army's Junior Officer Learning Programme](#).

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