

As originally
appeared in the
October 2001
issue of
Knowledge
Management,
published by
the ARK-Group.

THE EXTRAORDINARY POTENTIAL OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

*Storytelling has existed for centuries as a way of sharing knowledge and developing a sense of community. Here, **Seth Weaver Kahan** details his own story in an attempt to demonstrate the power of the technique, and to explore the greater contribution knowledge management might make beyond the world of business.*

Is knowledge management something extraordinary? I have noticed a remarkable verve among many of my KM colleagues that extends beyond ordinary enthusiasm. There is a feeling of being involved in a grand adventure that mixes humanity and professional development, as if KM is a space where business could potentially be more than just business. Let me elaborate by starting with a story – not a case study, but a fable.

Once upon a time...

A spaceship lands on earth inhabited by benevolent, highly intelligent creatures. Somehow they make it through our atmosphere without rousing the military and land on our soil. A call goes out around the world and the best minds of our generation are assembled to greet the aliens in person.

One of the aliens steps down out of the spaceship and after gracious formalities begins the conversation: “Earthling humans, you have been a species on this planet for thousands of years. What is your greatest discovery? What can you share with us that will demonstrate what you have learnt?”

A world leader who is, of course, intimately familiar with knowledge management, steps forward and responds: “Our knowledge is our prize possession. Our highly developed brains are capable of synthesising ideas and experience. For many years we have been concerned with how to pool our collective knowledge, how to

organise, manage and share it. We have spent a great deal of time on how to cultivate our tacit knowledge and apply it in healthy and productive ways.”

The alien speaks: “So, what can you show us? Can you explain or demonstrate what you have learnt?”

The world leader says: “Well, the truth is we have about 7,000 different initiatives and the leaders of our primary efforts don’t agree on what knowledge management is or even if we should call it that; maybe it should be knowledge sharing or knowledge development...or...er...”

As it stands, the story doesn’t have a satisfactory ending. But maybe something can be done about that. Maybe, just maybe, all the various knowledge management initiatives could be brought into some kind of global framework.

The power of meaning

Some of the best minds of our time believe we influence the world to a much greater degree than most of us are aware. That is, the way we think and what we believe about the ways of the world have a major impact on our future. This is because we are active participants shaping the future through the ordinary actions of our lives. David Bohm, the quantum physicist, wrote in his book, *Unfolding Meaning* (Routledge, 1985): “Your world view, the way you look at things, is part of you, just as any other thought is part of you. It will determine the way you approach the world... What kind of world will that produce?”

Bohm continues: “However deep or shallow one’s perceptions, all one perceives is what it means at that moment, and then intention and action develop in accordance with this meaning.” What he is saying here is that meaning shapes perception in fundamental ways.

Therefore, meaning is radically important. How do we begin to understand how we create meaning? Can we consciously fashion meaning? Isn’t it interesting that most of us are not trained in how best to do this? Many of us receive little guidance on how to create meaning intentionally. And we certainly don’t devote significant time to it in the workplace. Yet it is shaping our perception and our future.

I am fortunate enough to have come from a family where values were demonstrated and obvious, if not explicit and discussed. For example, I can remember as a small boy my father reacting angrily to a neighbour who referred to some people down the road using a derogatory racial term. My father’s temper blew hot. After angrily denouncing our neighbour to his face, which caught and held my attention, he huffed and puffed as he marched around our house decrying prejudice and insensitivity. I got the message and still remember it today: people are people and diminishing them according to their race is unacceptable.

But no one sat down and helped me as my little mind worked overtime to integrate that experience into the rest of my life. In fact, other than occasional sessions with family and school counsellors during my childhood, personal meaning was never directly addressed in any consistent way. I was left to my own experience and my own ad hoc techniques.

I recall philosophy teachers in high school and later in college purposefully refraining from dictating any values. They often asked me to reflect, but did they provide direction on specific values? Only by modelling, not by articulation. In fact, it was generally frowned upon as far as I could tell. Somehow I was expected to do my own values clarification in the company of my friends and with whatever books I could lay my hands on. I have an idea that a large part of the self-help industry thrives because of this unmet need in society.

I subsequently sought out those who were moving their lives in new directions by locating deeper and often hidden meaning through introspection. I found many in ‘personal growth’ or ‘human potential’ organisations. One seminar company in particular grabbed my attention (and my money and my time). I participated in as many of their events as I could, volunteering as a way to spend more time at the seminars. I loved to do the work myself, but I was also fascinated by watching others go through their own inner processes. I found it moving to see people grapple with issues, uncovering parts of themselves that brought clarity of vision and inspiring changes in behaviour. It was like watching flowers unfold and emerge in beautiful patterns of colour and shape.

Eventually I was offered a staff position with the seminar company building the graduate community, and offering follow up seminars. I was trained in the design and facilitation of large group events and gained plenty of experience. I stayed with this work for years before something ancient and primal began to rouse my curiosity.

Ancient templates for building community

I became intrigued by how some of the world's oldest cultures ensured continuity between generations. I started to read about aborigines and indigenous peoples; then I began to visit some native American Indian elders, representatives of cultures that have endured a great deal. I turned to them for wisdom about what was most important in life.

I was especially interested in rites of passage, designed to carry individuals on the journey from childhood to adulthood. These ceremonies are a form of social infrastructure designed to transform people from dependent youngsters into mature contributors who take responsibility for the community's well being. The transformation involves long, complicated processes that include many members of a community, only culminating in a ceremony.

I did not belong to a tribe so I could not hope to truly participate in a native American ceremony. However, I discovered there are people who study how to appropriately introduce these ceremonies into the mainstream. I set about looking for one of these events that straddled the gap between the worlds, and I was not disappointed.

One of the most ubiquitous ceremonies is the 'sweat lodge'. I remember my first experience vividly. For months I had been putting the word out that I wanted to participate in this ancient ritual designed to help one clarify life's purpose. Then one day, I received a call from a friend telling me he was leaving to participate in a sweat lodge in the countryside. Would I care to come along? I dropped my day's agenda and soon found myself in his car, bumping through a farm field. We parked on the grass and began a hike in the neighbouring woodlands.

Before long we came to a group of men busily assembling a small hut from saplings and blan-

kets. This was under the direction of a strange character, our leader, who busied himself in obscure activities that included waving burning sticks of dried sage and chanting. Soon we started a large bonfire. Twenty or so large boulders were placed into the centre of the fire, where they stayed for four or five hours. In the interim, I helped out with preparations and got to know the other people.

When the time came we all crawled into the hut, which had a great hollow in the centre where the rocks were to go. We stayed in that hut, all closely pressed together, for over two hours and it got very, very hot. As each rock was brought in, I could feel the temperature rise substantially. Following prayers and groans as a response to the heat, water was poured on the rocks, resulting in some of the most intense steam I have ever experienced, way beyond the sauna in my local gym. At several points I had to lie down in the sweat lodge in the search of cooler temperatures.

The heat was so intense that I became concerned for my safety, and therein was the doorway that led to my core values. In a single, intense moment I became vividly aware that my life was both precious and fragile. It was as if I had a chance to glimpse death before my time was up. From deep within I began to question what was I doing with my life. The issue became more than a mental hobby; it was a visceral occupation. The sweat lodge had begun to work its magic.

Toward the end participants shared their experiences and insights. Veterans of the ceremony explored these, especially the insights of the newcomers. The learning of the initiates was pulled apart and examined closely, and treasures for the community were discovered in the process. Later, as our story was recounted, these new treasures were incorporated.

For years, even to this day, that ceremony holds a special place in my memories. It anchors me to my quest seeking what is most centrally mine and at the same time of value to my community.

Back to work

At the same time as all of this was happening I was working at the World Bank, training staff to use the institutional technology systems: pro-

curement, project supervision, loan disbursement, etc. Over the years I became a local expert on technology training. I tutored vice presidents, designed seminars for project teams and ran open classes on many institutional programmes that relied on technology.

When the internet became widely available I put together a presentation that I offered during lunch and after hours to interested staff. It was a huge success. In six months I had trained almost 2,000 staff members. I was videotaped for global distribution and asked to design internet seminars for sector specialists. The bank's fledgling knowledge management initiative identified me and I was asked to put my group facilitation skills on my CV and come along to help transform the institution.

I was a member of the team that built the bank's first knowledge management system. It was based on new content management principles (in 1996) and used our intranet. The following year I went to work for Steve Denning, our KM programme director, and joined the small team that began to steer the large organisation to a new destination under the president's vision: the 'knowledge bank'. Steve was aware of my experiences outside the bank, including my many years as a performance artist and storyteller.

I have been a professional storyteller, performing folk tales, legends and poetry since 1978. Early on I performed folk tales from the Brothers Grimm and heroic legends such as Beowulf and King Solomon's Adventures. As my interest in community development grew, I experimented with personal storytelling as a rapport-building device in community gatherings. On the KM team, we recognised that the organisation is largely defined by the activities of its employees. If staff members are not sharing their learning process, the organisation is not growing.

Our team began to use storytelling as a means to break the ice in meetings. Denning worked, with great success, at using storytelling to evoke systemic change in the organisation. He developed 'springboard' stories (see his book, *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations*, Butterworth-Heinemann, 2001). I drew on the

forms I had learned in personal growth settings and ceremonies to develop processes for staff members to share their learning processes and interests. We didn't attempt to get people to understand storytelling. Instead, we used storytelling as a tool to build community.

I began to receive requests to visit other organisations. In many companies, I spoke about my work as a storyteller, experience in ceremonies and brought ceremonial objects into the workplace, sharing my symbols of community. I still work with a Cherokee 'talking stick', which symbolises the sharing of one's 'truth'. That's truth with a little t, not a big T – this truth is about personal understanding and experience, not ultimate meaning.

Symbols such as the talking stick are powerful stimuli. This power can be harnessed in the spirit of knowledge sharing quite effectively. I have used the talking stick often to generate a shared sense of community and common purpose at gatherings. Steve referred to my presentations as "turning suits into people". That phrase tells me that we are doing something special here, something fundamentally human – something that involves caring.

Who cares?

When I think of community, three foci come to mind: groups of people, a sense of shared purpose and caring. The first two are far easier to realise in a business context, but the third is no less important.

One of the more helpful writings I have come across in this regard comes from Nonaka and Nishiguchi's recent book, *Knowledge Emergence: Social, Technical and Evolutionary Dimensions of Knowledge Creation* (Oxford University Press, 2001). There is a chapter by Von Krogh, Ichijo and Nonaka entitled: 'Bringing care into knowledge development of business organisations'.

The authors are very interested in human relationships inside organisations. "We believe that knowledge development, especially social knowledge development, of organisations, cannot be taken for granted since knowledge is very fragile in them. Since individual knowledge can easily be killed, organisational knowledge development as a social activity can be quite

difficult, or in the worst case, impossible. Given this fragility, we argue that relationships in organisations must be given more attention.”

Social knowledge can be thought of as the common knowledge that resides among individuals, in the common space of the organisation. This has important implications with regards to an organisation’s ability to hold on to knowledge as significant numbers of staff retire. To the extent that the knowledge of staff can be transferred to the social space of the organisation, there is less of a loss to the company.

Furthermore, the quality of caring that exists in the relationships inside the organisation has a direct impact on the quality of knowledge that becomes social.

In the article the authors use the term ‘thematization’ to explain how explicit knowledge is developed (both individually and socially). In thematisation, “a language is learnt, words are being carefully selected for an experience, this linguistic choice is tested, misconceptions are corrected in interaction with others, new words are being invented to better convey the experiences in the eyes of the individual, and so on”.

In ‘low care’ organisations, the process of thematisation tends to be a private activity. Where it is not safe to share our foibles, we hide them and share results only when we are confident they can withstand scrutiny. These contrast with ‘high care’ organisations in which thematisation is a shared, group process. All of the lessons learnt and blind alleys are explored with others. We have the benefit of many minds to participate in thematisation, producing higher quality results.

In addition, because much of the groundwork of our thematisation is done in public in high care organisations, many more people are aware of what was learnt in the process. Thus, more knowledge is available in the organisation for others to use and apply. Importantly, it remains there when staff members leave, thus addressing the issue of retention of organisational knowledge.

The authors break ‘care’ into five explicit dimensions. The concept of care can be vague,

but their dimensions make it more tangible and much easier to apply. The dimensions include:

- A propensity to help
- Accessibility in both time and space for people to connect
- Attentive inquiry, emotional and factual
- Lenience
- Care as a shared value

This work shows how care makes a substantive contribution to knowledge development.

More than just business

Ceremonies assist participants with their inner development. The insights that arise from this development are shared with the community. These new perspectives are examined and reworked by leaders who then weave the insights into the existing social fabric. Values are not so much passed down as they are developed jointly, adjusted and blessed by the accepted leadership, and then integrated into the larger community.

We have a great deal to learn from these ancient ways of working together. I have seen some of these time-tested methods of human interaction introduced in contemporary business environments with great success. I can imagine bringing KM thought leaders together and weaving the fruit of their explorations into our social fabric, generating insights that apply to issues outside of business. As we study the myriad of ways that people develop and share knowledge, perhaps there are applications greater than business in store.

Imagine my story about the alien inquisition with a happy ending. The alien speaks: “So, what can you show us? Can you explain or demonstrate what you have learnt?”

The world leader replies with confidence and enthusiasm: “I was hoping you would ask that question. Let me tell you about what our civilization has been working on...”

Seth Weaver Kahan was a Senior Information Officer at the World Bank. Today he is a thought-leader, conference keynote speaker, and author. He can be reached via email at: Seth@SethKahan.com. His website is www.SethKahan.com