

# The Practice of Change and Learning

*Written to an SME in the media field*

As we have discussed already, ours is a heavily 'knowledge' and 'know how' based company, working as it does in the production of communications using digital media such as video and multimedia supporting 'experiences' and 'events'.

Comparing it with a more 'traditional' service business such as a solicitors or an accountants practice, there is a contrast in the channels for learning and professional competence. As Kolb (1984) (a key thinker in the field of 'experiential learning') highlights, 'traditional' businesses depend on professional practice and knowledge, which can be taught in a 'chalk and talk' style. .

## **Continuous Change**

However our industry, like many, experiences **continuous change**. Technology, formats and applications of our 'products' are in a constant state of flux. Knowledge 'taught' at a particular time rapidly becomes obsolete. There is immediately a case for continuous 'on the job' learning to maintain and increase our competency.

## **Unlocking Knowledge**

However, even more important than staying abreast of technology and techniques is our requirement to respond creatively to our clients. By 'creativity' we are agreed that we mean much more than offering attractive design. Our key concern is to successfully achieve the process of interpreting and translating the client's communication requirement into an effective

communication experience. This is really the core competency and distinctive of the organisation, so unless we can 'create knowledge' (to use the term of Nonaka and Takeuchi: 1995) we are constrained by the people who can currently do that, and exposed if they decide to leave!! Currently **the ability to do this is 'locked up'** in a very small proportion of our team.

We have acknowledged that in both these areas we have a problem.

In my investigations concerning this, key themes which have emerged are these:-

1. Creating a 'learningful' culture, by establishing cycles, or spirals of learning. This means shifting from a didactic and instructive model to a method of learning from experience, based on the 'learning cycle'.

2. Enabling 'personal' (as it is described by a seminal thinker, Michael Polanyi (1958)) or 'tacit' knowledge to be 'unlocked' and to become accessible to the whole organisation, therefore 'creating knowledge'. In our business the interpretation of client needs, the translation of them into effective communications experiences, and for that matter the business of selling in the first place (!) all depend on a body of tacit knowledge, which unlock in effective learning experiences if we are to create knowledge.

I have drawn on a body of literature to highlight a number of steps we can take to achieve this in our organisation. If we can crack this, we can also offer this insight to other businesses as one of our 'communication experiences'!

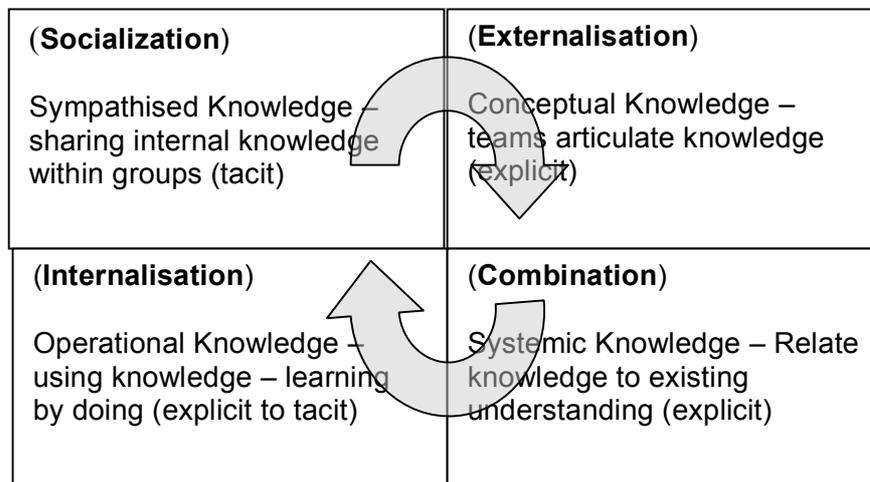
Let me start with the ending – what you get out of this! A 'holy grail' for many businesses is the goal of enabling more people within a team to do what a few

members do well. Let me give an example from another company we are familiar with:- ,

*A technology company selling specific software products for managing projects in the construction industry has a small number of older sales related staff who can sell these sophisticated products well. They have to understand the product, understand the client's needs, and demonstrate an effective match, dealing along the way with any objections. The rest of their sales team know the product, and are experienced salespeople, but they regularly fail to achieve this 'matching' between product and client, and lose the sale. The company find it very difficult to extract the 'tacit' or 'personal' knowledge from their few high quality salespeople, and share it with the broader team.*

The analogy I use is with learning to ski. As you may know, beginners start with the 'snowplough' and their goal is to learn to 'parallel ski' where one can zigzag round the mountain smoothly and comfortably with the skis parallel. It is impossible to learn to do this by watching a skilled ski-er doing it. The knowledge of how to do it is a body of 'tacit' or 'personal' knowledge. The solution to this problem is to 'convert' tacit to 'explicit' knowledge. 'explicit' knowledge can be shared. To use our example, the ski instructor can teach a number of exercises, concerned with balance, shifting weight, manipulating skis and so on, which as they are developed and combined gradually enable the learner to internalise these explicit components and master the skill of parallel ski-ing. In the same way, in the industrial holy grail of sharing knowledge throughout the organisation, there needs to be a 'conversion' process which takes a body of tacit knowledge and turns it into 'explicit' components which can be shared.

Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) criticise us westerners for concentrating on the explicit and 'rational' to the exclusion of the 'tacit' and Jerry Gill (1993) echoes this in highlighting the way tacit is associated with 'subjective' and relegated to the realm of 'hunch' and intuition. This is important as much industry still depends on tacit sources of knowledge. Hirsch-Kreinsen *et al* (2003) demonstrate from a Europe-wide survey that industry, including the service sector, is still predominantly low and medium tech and needs to draw on the tacit knowledge within its operations to progress. Nonaka and Takeuchi 'map' the kinds of knowledge translation which need to be achieved as follows:

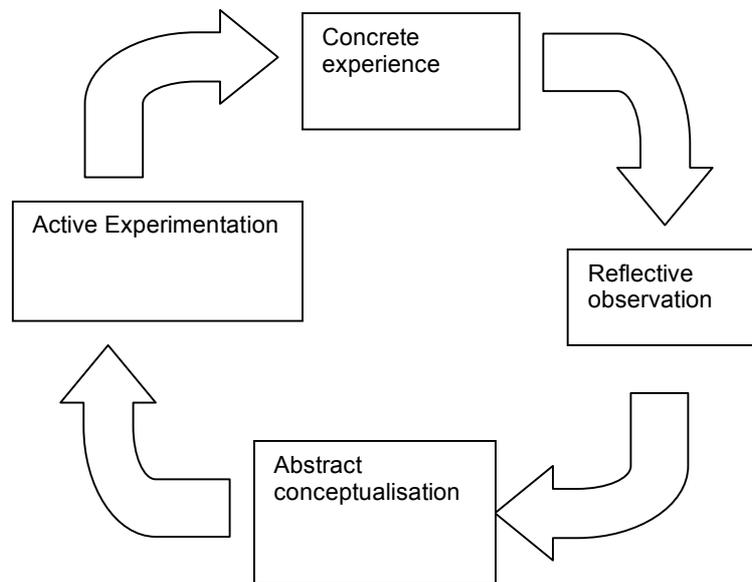


Knowledge conversion cycle based on Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) p 72

Their diagram shows how 'know how' in the top left quadrant is drawn on by teams, and becomes explicit conceptual knowledge which adds to the overall systemic knowledge of the organisation, and is internalised by the team members. This might be the knowledge I referred to above relating to marketing in the construction firm (or more to the point in our firm!) or knowledge of how to interpret and respond to a brief, for example.

There are number of activities which can be applied to achieve this. I know that you are suspicious of flashy management initiatives, so without boring you I will

simply indicate that there is a respectable literature and body of thinking lying behind this. Although the 'learning cycle' is often attributed to David Kolb, (1984) he himself attributes it to thinkers such as Dewey, Lewin and Piaget, whose respective focuses are on experiential learning, an interplay of action and reflection, and the idea of development of understanding depending on experience.



Learning cycle, based on Kolb (1984) p42

Here is an example of the learning cycle in action from our own business:-

*We have often discussed the fact that we offer too much to clients at the proposal stage, and our work often functions as 'free information' which is included in tender invitations which we don't necessarily win! This represents 'experience' which we have 'reflected' on.*

*In a brainstorm meeting for such a project recently one of the team raised this point and suggested that we tried presenting a much more terse (but*

*'tempting') proposal. This represents 'abstract conceptualisation' based on the 'reflective observation' on our previous experience. One of the directors suggested that this carried with it an element of risk, as our 'skeleton' response might not be sufficiently attractive, compared with the fuller documents we usually produce. The team then agreed that nevertheless we would try this approach – ie 'active experimentation'. In fact the client was very positive about the proposal, so our 'concrete experience' as we start to move round the circle again is that we have learnt experientially that we can improve our strategy. This has depended on allowing an element of risk. Without this it is very difficult to change behaviour*

The fact that this work takes place in groups is itself significant. For example Reg Revans (1982) has been at the hub of a body of work on 'Action Learning' which stimulates experiential learning through linking work on a 'real' problem to interaction with a group or 'set' who stimulate the process of reflection and learning. Christian Schumacher (son of the distinguished thinker Edward Schumacher of 'Small is Beautiful' fame) has also assisted organisations in establishing small teams with the complete planning, doing and evaluation process – mirroring the learning cycle. The approach places an interesting emphasis on relatively autonomous groups undertaking whole tasks, and critically evaluating and learning from their work. (Web reference: 2005).

These approaches have been applied widely in industry and the public sector, both here and abroad. What all of them share in common is an understanding of learning which quite different, as the revolutionary educational thinker Paulo Freire (1972) says – from the 'banking' theory of learning. He argues that learning is not about loading people with facts, like making a deposit at a bank, it starts from experience, crucially depends on creating the opportunity for people to reflect on that experience and on analysing their reflections; and empowers them as a result. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) have argued

persuasively that the success of Japanese firms in innovation and development is due to them becoming 'Knowledge Creating' companies. In a well known case study Laestadius (1995) shows how stimulating this process gives a relatively low tech manufacturing company an important competitive edge.

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### **How to develop our business as a learning organisation**

These are concepts which I believe can help us move towards being a 'learningful organisation'

#### *Workteams*

Several examples above show how valuable teamworking is as part of creating a learning dynamic. We move people from individual 'vulnerable' roles to workteams – Laestadius (1995) in his example of the mooring chain firm emphasises the need to draw workers together into teams gathered round collective tasks, and this is essential to Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) model of knowledge conversion

#### *'Perturbation'*

We give these teams 'ownership' of whole projects. This leads to 'perturbation' ('disturbance', 'unsettling') as they have to take unfamiliar responsibilities. This is important as an important aspect of stimulating learning, as Nonaka and Takeuchi outline (1995) We increase the element of 'perturbation' by making it a principle of workteams that they take on unfamiliar roles (Again Nonaka and Takeuchi show how this pairing of people to exchange skills and knowledge which are novel to them can be effective in 'Knowledge Creation') Harrison and Hopkins (1967) document the way that such perturbation can lead to effective learning, compared with 'chalk and talk' however as Finegold

and Soskice (1998) note, workers can suffer from '*in-learnt helplessness*' and resist interaction and responsibility. We know there's a challenge here!

### *Mentoring*

We encourage active mentoring which is not done in a 'top down' way, from manager to employee, but takes the 'Action Learning' model of Reg Revans (1982) and stimulates 'peer to peer' mentoring. In this way the mentoring function is one of trust and support rather than 'control' and is esteem-building for both the mentored and the mentor.

### *Learning cycles*

As you rightly highlighted in discussion – tacit knowledge may be locked up anywhere in the business, and we're not even sure where it is. Organising teams who are encouraged and released to pursue cycles of action, reflection, analysis and experimentation can unlock insights and knowledge wherever they reside. Finegold and Soskice (1998) refer to a '*workforce of explorers*' rather than a '*workforce of executors*' and give several examples from Swedish business of the benefits of developing the workforce in this way. The proviso below is important in allowing this to happen.

*No blame culture*

We need to underpin this with a shift from high control and low trust – ie low risk, to low control and high trust – that is high risk, otherwise learning will not take place. Therefore we need to dismantle our existing and sophisticated timesheet system and invite our own team to design a system which is clearly designed to provide work teams with useful cost information, rather than being seen to monitor or control them.

*'Right brain'*

Its been a long time since the whole studio went off to Alton Towers! We have a very limited social life together and boosting this may be part of moving towards Nonaka and Takeuchi's more holistic view of how we work and interact. So lets party!

**Word Count: 2009**

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