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## *A Delightful Dozen Principles of Knowledge Management*

Excerpt from Verna Allee's management book, *The Knowledge Evolution: Expanding Organizational Intelligence*, published by Butterworth-Heinemann, 1997. Originally published as "Knowledge and Self-organization," by *Executive Excellence*, Jan. 1997.

Knowledge is always changing. In an organization, knowledge changes around products, services, processes, technology, structures, roles and relationships. No sooner do we think we have identified a pattern of knowledge than a new one seems to appear. So if this basic component of organizational intelligence is always changing, how do we organize to support it?

From an old mechanistic thinking perspective we would try to design the optimum knowledge "machine." I'm not sure what that might look like. I have a mental picture of something like a giant fan that sucks in raw data at one end and blows out neat little knowledge packages at the other. However, knowledge is too complex and fluid to be designed, processed and managed in such a fashion.

From a new thinking perspective we would approach things a little differently. When we put on our system viewers we see knowledge as a complex system. From this vantage point we can see some hard realities to face about knowledge.

### **Tenets of Organizational Knowledge**

- 1. Knowledge is "messy."** In organizations every aspect of knowledge is connected to everything else. You cannot neatly isolate the "knowledge" component of anything. Organizational knowledge relates to culture, structures, technology and the unique configuration of individuals that make up the organization. Knowledge also sits in the larger social context of national and global "knowledge environment." So, any attempt to identify knowledge factors faces an inherent messiness. In the knowledge universe you cannot pay attention to just one thing. No matter how you try to isolate knowledge, you find something else clinging to it.
- 2. Knowledge is self-organizing.** Every day, knowledge is created, sustained, killed off and renewed in an organization. Knowledge has a life of its own; it is a self-organizing entity. The "self" that knowledge organizes around is organizational or group identity and purpose.
- 3. Knowledge seeks community.** Knowledge wants to happen, just as life wants to happen and both want to happen as community. Nothing illustrates this principle more than the explosive growth of the Internet. Communities of knowledge are so powerful that they now involve people in conversation with each other all over the globe.
- 4. Knowledge travels on language.** Language is the verbal blueprint of our experience. Without a word or a language to describe our experience we cannot communicate what we know. Every mode of knowledge travels on a different language. Language initiates us into a particular world of experience. For example, traditional management uses the language of statistical control, inspection, and balance sheets. One is not "initiated" into management ranks without learning this language. Expanding organizational knowledge means we must expand the languages we use to describe our work experience.
- 5. Knowledge is slippery.** The more you try to pin knowledge down, the more it slips away. It is tempting to try to tie up knowledge as codified knowledge, documents, patents, intellectual property, libraries, and databases. Yet, too much rigidity and formality lead to the unwanted side effect of stifling creativity and new knowledge development. This principle brings to mind the tragedy of King Midas whose daughter turned to solid gold at his touch. He gained a golden statue but

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lost the living, breathing vibrancy of the daughter he loved.

**6. *Looser is probably better.*** Highly adaptable systems look sloppy. But the survival rate of diverse, decentralized systems is higher. This means we can waste resources and energy trying to control knowledge processes too tightly.

**7. *Knowledge keeps changing.*** There is no final solution in knowledge management. The patterns of knowledge are always changing. The best approach or solution for the moment is one that keeps things moving along while keeping options open. Flexibility in approach and in thinking is a must. There are always different approaches to try. In fact, the on-going conversation about knowledge is much more important than coming up with the right answer.

**8. *Knowledge does not grow forever--something eventually dies or is lost.*** A number of people in knowledge management hold an unchallenged assumption that knowledge continuously grows. Yet, think how exhausting it would be to only have continual growth. *Constant growth does not hold true in nature and it does not hold true for knowledge.* There is a big difference between *advancing* knowledge and simply building knowledge. Unlearning and letting go of old ways of thinking, even retiring whole blocks of knowledge and expertise, contributes to the vitality and evolution of knowledge.

**9. *No one is really in charge.*** At the core, knowledge is a social process. Only people *together* make knowledge happen. No one individual makes knowledge happen. What this means is no one person can take responsibility for collective knowledge. Knowledge managers cannot really manage knowledge itself. However, they can and do help devise and manage processes for acquiring, creating, sharing and applying knowledge. A knowledge manager can also attend to strategies for removing barriers and creating a supporting culture for those processes.

**10. *You cannot impose rules and systems.*** If knowledge is truly self-organizing, then the most important way you can advance it is to remove the barriers to self-organization. Knowledge will take care of itself in the right supporting environment. It is a waste of effort to create guidelines, rules or technology systems that no one cares about or supports. It is more valuable to see what is working well and devise ways to support and enhance the natural processes.

**11. *There is no silver bullet.*** There is no one magical leverage point or best practice to advance knowledge and expand organizational intelligence. Knowledge must be supported at multiple levels and in a variety of ways if it is truly valued. Genuine solutions require a systems approach, careful thought, reflection, experimentation and constant adjustment.

**12. *How you define the knowledge "problem" determines what and how you try to manage.*** The knowledge question can present itself in many ways. If an organization is concerned with ownership, then energy focuses on acquiring codified knowledge that can be protected with copyrights and patents. If people are concerned with knowledge sharing, then they emphasize communication flow and documentation. Concern with key knowledge competencies for the future leads to seeking more effective ways to create, adapt and apply knowledge. Attending to *all* of these areas would reflect an extremely high value for knowledge and requires a great deal of commitment.

Given all that, there are still a number of ways that we can advance knowledge. It is possible to identify processes, structures, and organizational enablers that support the creating, sustaining, sharing and renewing of knowledge.

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