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## ***Knowledge or Learning?***

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Knowledge management and organizational learning are really two sides of a core question of how do knowledge and learning contribute to value creation and generate wealth for organizations and for the economy at large. Many people steeped in learning organization practice are a bit confused by the sudden enthusiasm for knowledge management and may even feel that it is a wrong direction. Thinking about these two aspects as “two camps” is really quite unnecessary and dissipates a lot of energy that is better spent focusing on what people are trying to achieve and guiding them into new ways of working together that will enhance knowledge creation, learning and sharing.

Learning is the foundation of knowledge. I think of learning as the processes that support acquiring or creating knowledge. In practice, many people view knowledge management as the manipulation of knowledge objects (such as documents and organized data) and focus on organizing, sorting, cataloging and delivering those objects throughout the organization. This is important, but it is only the tip of the iceberg. My view of knowledge management, one that is shared with the top practitioners in this area, is much larger. For me, knowledge management refers to the facilitation of processes for creating, sustaining, sharing, and renewing knowledge to enhance organizational performance and generate value. By that definition, the capacity to learn as an organization is absolutely critical for success. Along with that, skillfully employing technology to sustain and share the core knowledge resource of the enterprise is invaluable.

Top practice companies are demonstrating the value of this perspective. One of the outstanding companies in knowledge management is British Petroleum. However, their knowledge management practices were sown in extremely fertile ground as they had engaged in several years of building a learning culture, following learning organization principles. They also develop internal communities of practice as the mechanism for fostering a high quality of knowledge in mission critical areas. Their combined learning and knowledge management approach has realized over a quarter of a billion dollars in business results for BP, under the guidance of their Kent Greenes and the strong leadership of CEO John Brown. It did take the explicit focus on knowledge, however, to demonstrate how learning grows the type of knowledge that can be converted directly into business results.

What I see in companies that are successfully leveraging knowledge are technologies astutely employed to support work groups and communities. Buckman Laboratories, Pillsbury, General Motors, Johnson & Johnson, Hewlett Packard, The World Bank, Chevron, Skandia and other top companies in this field are quite clear that knowledge results from human learning processes and view technology as a supporting mechanism. There is also a growing appreciation that most knowledge creation and sharing happen in a tacit person-to-person way and very little happens through explicit documents or formal learning. Thus, we are seeing a tremendous interest in how to support communities of practice and knowledge networks, which are at the heart of learning organization practice.

There are, of course, many companies that feel focusing on human activities is simply too difficult, costly or unnecessary -- as they waste millions on databases and technology gizmos that are sadly underutilized or inappropriate. Those of us who do have a larger learning perspective must be careful we do not set up an "opposing camp" mentality in the way we discuss knowledge management efforts. As one more expression of an underlying need to tap a deeper organizational wisdom, the field inevitably opens up questions that are so deep and complex they need all the skill we can bring to them.

As core questions of value creation begin to center more and more on knowledge and learning, we have a great opportunity at hand. In the larger sense, we can help organizations navigate the shift from industrial-age mechanistic business models to those that are more adaptive based on insights we are gaining from living systems and the study of human behavior. As early efforts – that have ignored the larger questions of learning – there is a growing receptivity to and need for consultants and practitioners who can address knowledge management issues and organizational learning practices – together!