

Creative Perspectives on Knowledge Management

By Andres Roberts

In March 2011 I had the pleasure of being invited by Nancy Dixon in Washington DC - joining two other Knowledge Management stars Nick Milton and Karl Wiig – on a ‘Deep Dive’ to support international health organisations in Knowledge Management. It was a fantastic workshop with great learning and connections made. Here I sum up some of the ideas I shared as well as other thoughts that emerged and some helpful references.

Two propositions through a story

Nancy first asked me to share a *story* based on my experiences in Knowledge Management. So we immediately had something nice to frame my presentation – the notion of a story. The simple word ‘story’ creates rich meaning for all of us; it invites us to open to a new way of communicating, acting and sharing. Here lies a simple example of what I would talk about – that we are human, that we interpret meaning in different and creative ways, and that these interpretations enrich the way we build knowledge and learning. I then shared two propositions:

1. Knowledge from a very human perspective

The first proposition is that being human, we need to be aware of and work with our different ‘ways of knowing’. I referenced Reason and Torbert in presenting four different ways of knowing:

- **Experiential** – the ways we sense and feel the world around us (how I know what wine tastes like)
- **Propositional** – the concepts, abstracts and theories that we encounter (how I know how wine becomes alcoholic)
- **Practical** – ‘hands on’ learning that comes with sharing and practice (how I might learn the mechanics of picking grapes and operating tools in wine making)
- **Propositional** – the ways we sense sight, sound, stories and feelings - subtle sensations offering and a different kind of meaning (how I might learn the near unexplainable *art* of making a great wine.)

So – managing knowledge is much more than transferring propositional know-how. As humans we experience, feel and sense knowledge in different ways – we should plan for this.

2. Letting go of past assumptions to ‘co-create’ the future

My second proposition was the notion that we must get better at letting go of past assumptions and opinions in order to create richer futures (this was also to frame the exercise that followed my presentation – the creation of a past, present and future wall). The principle here is that if we work towards the future while holding deeply engrained assumptions from the past, we will simply recreate new versions of the past. More so, as we grow older we lose the childlike ability to explore and rehearse through play (all the more so when things get ‘serious’). So we must work harder at finding this sense of open exploration – essentially, we must remember to *play*. I referenced here the work of Donald Winnicott around ‘transitional objects’. The wall in the room was our own transitional object: a toy

through which we could explore many possibilities, opportunities and ideas. Something to approach with childlike courage!

Three creative perspectives supporting change and learning

From here I presented three aspects of creativity in learning and managing knowledge – Imagination, Visioning and Play:

1. Imagination

Fascinated by the notion of organisational imagination, I drew comparisons to how an artist might develop 'newness'. In fact this does not come 'out of the blue'. Many rich works of wonder come from a burning desire or a passionate question, and then a quest to find inspiration: images, sound, materials, textures, muses, landscapes, spaces – whatever it is that helps the work of art 'come true'. So we can look at how an organisation develops new ideas and learning in a similar way: first finding out its burning questions, then looking out for amazing sources of inspiration.

I shared an example of the British Marines, who went out to free runners to learn how to move in urban environments. And also Punjabi police, who went to Banghra dance groups to improve their fitness!

Imagination questions to prompt thinking:

- How do you help people define burning passions or questions?
- How do you help find and connect to sources of inspiration?

2. Visioning

Much of what we do in life happens through metaphors that convey the 'thousand words' that a picture might explain. Traffic lights tell us to stop without even thinking about it. Sayings such as '*A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush*' says a whole lot of things in any given context. And some organisations have gone on to develop even their own language in expressing performance criteria, success factors or ways of developing what they do (the makers of the board game 'Cranium' provide an excellent case study in the value of developing your own language.)

I suggested there are 2 aspects to visioning: Firstly 'coding' the meaning of the message, then deciding on the medium through which to send the message – both can be interpreted in an array of creative ways with the purpose of being more engaging and enticing. As came up later in the session, we also explored the notion that you don't have to play the role of 'broadcaster'; there is more richness in holding a dialogue, so perhaps all you need to be is a 'broker' – holding the space for other people to connect knowledge themselves (I gave one group the example of the website 'Netmums' as an example of this. I also referred to Goldcorp mining company as an Open Source approach to knowledge and subsequent innovation).

Visioning questions:

- What are the pictures that tell a thousand words for your meanings?
- What are the mediums that make it easy and enticing to take part?

3. Play

Finally, I touched on Play as a way of developing space and freedom to develop new forms of knowledge. If we take play as a way of making this space to connect, learn and 'rehearse' we see that many new things can happen here. I gave the example of last year's Nobel Laureates in Physics - Andre Geim and Konstantin Novoselov – whose success in work around the material Graphene came not from their formal research but from their 'Friday evening experiments' – a deliberate space in which to play around with new ideas (thanks to Daniel Pink for this lovely example, which he presented in a conference I attended some days before this work). We can then take examples of new ways of working such as Google's – where '20% time' allows people to innovate and create from a free perspective. Gmail and other leading Google innovations all came from this magical non-linear place!

A question on play:

- What context are you creating for people to play? I.e. first of all to connect, then be free to co-create with a sense of ownership?

Some final insights

Through the session we also drew out insights and observations to summarise at the end of the workshop. Here are the things that came out for me – relevant for the group and perhaps for Health Care Improvement further afield:

Moving from What to How to Why

As a group we explored a shift of emphasis from sharing information around from the 'what' to the 'how' in order to make the learning more meaningful. I shared that colleagues of mine have done much to develop work around Quality and Health and Safety in other sectors, and that here there is a lot of value in moving on from this and exploring the 'why' at a personal level. When we ask a doctor or a nurse why they choose to wash their hands or not, we move from instructing to engaging at a deeper level: we create a space for deeper reflection and *ownership*. This can be critical.

Knowledge from an Appreciative, Strengths perspective

A second aspect which became important for me was around an appreciative approach – focusing on strengths and what can be achieved rather than gaps that exist. Here we can look at aspects of work around Appreciative Inquiry – something that came up with a number of the group. Something to explore for the future I think.

A collaborative approach

Finally I also encourage the group to look at what they might 'let go off'. In an open source world, how much needs to be 'controlled'. What does this say about our role as knowledge managers? Do we manage or facilitate? Do we make or cultivate?

A parting quote of inspiration!

"There is no scientific evidence that seriousness leads to greater growth, maturity, or insight into the human condition than playfulness."

John Paul Lederach, 2005

References

Articles/Blogs

More thoughts from me on creativity:

http://www.kessels-smit.com/info.pl/en/learning_company/913

An article by me and a colleague on how Kessels & Smit 'works':

<http://www.managementexchange.com/story/being-true-learning-company-living-dream>

Peter Reason with Bill Torbert on Social Transformation and 4 ways of knowing (see appendix in this document for an overview of the four aspects)

http://www.peterreason.eu/Papers/Transformational_Social_Science.pdf

Wider sources and inspiring reading

Creative organisations including Cranium, Goldcorp and other examples I shared:

See Mavericks at Work: <http://www.mavericksatwork.com/>

Approaching the future openly – a source I really appreciate:

Theory U – open conversations: <http://www.ottoscharmer.com/publications/summaries.php>

About collaborative/open space working

We Think: <http://www.wethinkthebook.net/home.aspx>

A film on collaborative and open methods – may be a little dated but worth a look if this is something you are starting to think about: <http://www.usnowfilm.com/>

Finally I must reference Chris Seeley for the beautiful quote on seriousness and play – more so on her invitation to be brave in playful transformations!:

<http://www.ashridge.org.uk/website/ic.nsf/0/45887c34b826ad8080257729003ff6ed?OpenDocument>

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ⁱ The Health Care Improvement work is sponsored by USAID, coordinated by University Research Company and it involves a wider consortium of international health organisations. It was a privilege to join a wonderful group on a theme that is literally a matter of life and death. I'm very happy that my creative twist was helpful and inspiring!