Work with Tacit Knowledge

Ludmila Mládková [1]

Abstract **Knowledge consists of two dimensions, tacit and explicit. Companies work well with explicit knowledge but they have problems to work with tacit dimension in which they have huge wealth. Tacit dimension of knowledge is highly personal. It is hidden in the brain of its owner, human being, interrelated to his/her activities, difficult to formalize. There are three natural tools for work with tacit knowledge. The article briefly explains them.**

Keywords – **Knowledge. Tacit knowledge, Storytelling. Communities. Apprenticeship. .**

I. INTRODUCTION

Tacit dimension of knowledge is important for any organization. It is a prerequisite of success or failure of our activities. Tacit knowledge interacts with explicit knowledge in process of conversion. It can be rewritten to explicit knowledge through so called externalization but as the results of externalization are often dubious, many organizations prefer to leave and share tacit knowledge in tacit form.

II. TACIT KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge is a changing system with interactions among experience, skills, facts, relations, values, thinking processes and meanings. It is the information plus our experience, mental models, relations, values, principles we live by, believes, commitment, etc. [5]. Knowledge is always related to human action and emotion; it is created in our heads.

Literature makes the difference between two types of knowledge, so called explicit and tacit dimensions.

Explicit knowledge can be expressed in formal and systematic language and can be shared in the form of data, scientific formulae, specifications, manuals, and so on. It can be easily processed, transmitted and stored. Some authors think that explicit knowledge is equal to information.

Tacit knowledge is highly personal and hard to discover and formalize. Explicit knowledge and intuition, mental models, experience, crafts, skills etc., create it. It is deeply rooted in action, procedures, routines, commitment, ideas, value and emotions. It is very difficult to communicate and share it. Some authors think that tacit knowledge can be turned to explicit (Nonaka and Takeuchi), same people have doubts and think that it is impossible (Polanski) because if we try to formalize it we damage it.

[1] Ludmila Mládková works at University of Economics Prague, Faculty of Business Administration, Department of Management, Prague, Nám. W. Churchilla 4, Czech Republic

Western nations tend to view knowledge as primarily explicit; the Japanese as primarily tacit. Anyway, these two types of knowledge are complementary. Too much focus on explicit knowledge leads to 'paralysis by analysis', too much focus on tacit knowledge leads to over reliance on past success and the elimination of new information, ideas and viewpoints.

Explicit and tacit knowledge interact with each other in people's creative activities. For example, if we try to play a piece of music on the piano, we have to practice it. First we have to learn how to co-ordinate our two hands, 10 fingers, two legs and our eyes that read the music. When we know how to do it, we have to pay attention to that very piece of music. Practicing it we read the explicit knowledge formalized by the notes and concentrate on the keys and pedals. Later on when we get to a more advanced phase, we do not have to concentrate on how we are doing it (relationship among notes, keys, our eyes, hands, fingers, pedals and legs) and we start to concentrate on what we are doing - on the music. It is the moment when tacit knowledge comes to action. Suddenly something transforms and the pianist plays the music without concentrating on how but fully concentrating on what. The same happens if we learn something new - riding a bike, skating, walking, etc. in tacit form.

III. WORK WITH TACIT KNOWLEDGE

Tacit dimension of knowledge is important for any organization. It is a prerequisite of success or failure of our activities. As externalization of tacit knowledge does not lead automatically to success, many organizations prefer to leave tacit knowledge as it is and share it in tacit form. Tacit knowledge can be shared via three traditional tools – apprenticeship, communities and storytelling.

IV. APPRENTICESHIP

Apprenticeship represents traditional model of tacit knowledge exchange. It is based on the relationship between the one, who already has tacit knowledge, the master, and the one who wants to learn it, the apprentice. The master developed his/her knowledge and skills over the years in different situations and tries to articulate (make them explicit) and demonstrate them to the apprentice. The enviable part of the apprenticeship is sharing through the non-verbal personal practical experience of the apprentice, carefully monitored by the master. The apprentice is reshaping the master's knowledge to his/her own knowledge. The process is slow and may be based on some social obligation (social contract), e.g. both master and apprentice are obliged to co-operate - the apprentice is obliged to learn and the master is obliged to pass

on his knowledge. The master's obligation is important in later phases of the apprenticeship when he/she may feel threaten by a bright apprentice.

The apprenticeship process is replicated to the coaching, mentoring and counseling processes these days.

V. COMMUNITIES

Communities, or communities of practices, are groups of people who have some common interest, so called domain, who share knowledge and have friendly relationship. People join communities to share their knowledge, to solve problems and best practices, and to fulfill their emotional, intellectual and other needs. Community members depend on each others' knowledge, skills and expertise. Communities may be created purposefully or emerge naturally from volunteers. They can be physical or virtual. Communities can be efficient only when there is a good connection and communication between people.

The major purpose of the community, the domain, should be clear. The community may create the shared vision and strategy and define objectives. Community members do not have to work in the same field. For example, the community which tries to find an efficient way of how to treat a disease may include physicians, physicists, psychologists, qualified nurses, rehab nurses, etc.

Communities can be found in any organization, even though managers do not know about them. Communities can improve innovativeness of organization, quality of thinking, improve knowledge sharing, reduce duplications of effort, improve quality, and reduce costs. On the other hand they may behave in dysfunctional way and harm interests of managers. Wise managers try to identify communities in their organization and support them to maximize their positive effects on organization.

VI. STORYTELLING

Story is a natural format for sharing tacit knowledge. It bypasses defense mechanisms and helps people to understand things from common perspective. It offers a virtual reality when people can learn and build their tacit knowledge. Storytelling can be used for several purposes in organizations – for tacit knowledge sharing, when managers need to influence their stakeholders, explain visions, settle conflicts, etc.

The format of the story and the style of storytelling depend on three factors. The first factor is the content of the story. The content of the story is the tacit knowledge that is transferred. The second factor is a storyteller, his/her personality, language skills and ability to transform the knowledge to the story. The third factor is the audience, their activity and relation to the story and the storyteller, their previous knowledge, experience, mental models, their ability to open their minds to the story and understand it. The successful transmission of knowledge requires a closer relationship between the storyteller and the audience [3].

Storytelling is a natural way how to share tacit knowledge. For example Hasidic Jews find stories a divine commandment and spiritual practice. "Storytelling is effective leadership practice. Stories are simple, timeless, and can appeal to everybody regardless of age, gender, or race – they are fun. Stories are a useful form of training, a good method for empowering people, great as a recognition device, a recruiting and hiring tool, a sales technique, and an excellent way to pass along corporate tradition [1]."

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Tacit knowledge is the crucial dimension of knowledge. It is linked to the personality of its owner and activities he/she is doing. It influences what we do, how we do it and how successful in our activities we are. Tacit knowledge can be transformed to the explicit one by externalization. Externalization is a difficult process during which tacit knowledge can be damaged. It is often easier and more efficient to share tacit knowledge by three natural traditional tools, apprenticeship, communities and storytelling.

REFERENCES

[1]   ARMSTRONG, D. E. Managing by Storying around:A New Method of Leadership. Doubleday. NY.1992.
[2]   MLÁDKOVÁ, L.: Management in Non-Linear Environment, VŠE, Praha, 2003, ISBN 80-245-0472-3
[3]   MLÁDKOVÁ L.: Moderní přístupy k managementu. Tacitní znalost a jak ji řídit. C.H.Beck. Praha 2005. ISBN 80-7179-310-8.
[4]   NONAKA I., TAKEUCHI, H. The Knowledge Creating Company: How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation. Oxford University Press. UK. 1995. ISBN 0-19-509269.
[5]   VEBER J. a kol.: Management, základy, prosperita, globalizace, Management Press, Praha, 2000, ISBN 80-7261-029-5.