

LET'S GET NATURAL: COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE AND THE DISCOURSE OF SPONTANEOUS SHARING IN KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Contemporary models of knowledge management are often based on attempts to mimic social processes that emerge spontaneously in outside society. This paper explores the issue of how the management of knowledge has increasingly become 'naturalized' by importing Japanese management practices. We then discuss how academics and practitioners have extolled the ubiquitous benefits of community approach to replicate the Japanese competitive success, which has led to interest in communities of practice concept in relation to knowledge management discourse. We posit that tensions surface within organizations when they approach the natural work practices from a process perspective. We conclude by arguing that many of the practices of knowledge management operate within the rational view framework in spite of ostensibly advocating natural view approaches such as Communities of Practice. For this reason, much of knowledge management.

Keywords: natural, rational, Japan, communities of practice.

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Introduction

Novartis is a \$25 billion dollar corporation headquartered in Basel, Switzerland, with close to 80,000 people located in over 140 countries around the world. Like many large corporations today Novartis believes that knowledge is central to its success, and like most it believes that creating and mobilizing knowledge ultimately depends on developing new ways of bringing people together. The best way of achieving this goal, concluded Novartis is by bringing people together is best done by mimicking social life outside the office. With this in mind, the company is investing millions of dollars in transforming working spaces. Teams of psychologists and designers have been studying the family for inspiration. The model is the kitchen table in the evening, after the day's work is done. As the company magazine puts it:

In the evening they all sit together at the table: mother studies a travel brochure, father speaks to a colleague on the phone - and the two children are busy with their homework. Now and then one of them asks a question. All the members of the family spontaneously share the joys and heartaches of the day (Kellaway, 2003).

The main impetus that is driving Novartis and so many other corporations to invest millions of dollars in redesigning their organizations is the belief that learning and the production knowledge are central to success in the 21st century. This clear bottom line view of the importance of learning and knowledge, however, is often married to models that are far removed from instrumental rationality. This mimicry of social life for avowedly instrumental purposes represents a swing towards the 'natural' in the sense first outlined by Scott

(2003): Organizations are increasingly trying to replicate within social processes that emerge spontaneously in the outside society.

In the process of replicating society within organization, managers confront two challenges: First, they must legitimate the use of social models within the boundaries of organizations, and second they successfully translate these models into reality. In this paper we argue that both processes are related. The legitimation of creating spontaneous social reality in systems that are ultimately governed by rational order and instrumental rationality was based on Japanese experience, or more precisely, Western interpretation of Japanese experience. This in turn greatly influenced the way that organizations went about transferring and creating social realities within organizations.

Both legitimizing and transferring knowledge management practices from Japanese to Western context depend on rhetoric that is essentially Western. Western conceptions of organizations, however, tends to veer between what rational and natural rhetoric views of the antecedents and functioning of organizations. With the rise to prominence of knowledge intensive organizations, we are seeing a strong shift towards the natural view as the best model for reconstituting existing organizations.

This paper explores the issue of how the management of knowledge has increasingly become 'naturalized' by importing Japanese (or even Eastern) management practices to resolve the ontological dilemmas that exist between communalism and individualism. We then discuss how academics and

practitioners have extolled the ubiquitous benefits of community approach to replicate the Japanese competitive success, which has led to interest in communities of practice concept in relation to knowledge management discourse. We then posit that tensions surface within organizations when they approach the natural work practices from a process perspective. We conclude by arguing that many of the practices of knowledge management operate within the rational view framework in spite of their ostensive advocacy of such natural view approaches as Communities of Practice. For this reason, much of knowledge management falls short of expectations. The answer, we would suggest, is to complete the cycle: the rational transfer of natural practices can only succeed once practices are reinserted into what is natural in their new settings

Learning from Japanese Management Practices

Western managerial discourse is rhetorically informed by two thematically contrasting perspectives (Barley and Kunda, 1992). The first set of rhetorics emphasizes rational control. Proponents of scientific management and systems rationalism have long argued that productivity stems from carefully articulated methods and systems. Managers are assumed to be experts who bring rational approach to bear on the firm's problems. Employees are equally assumed to be calculative actors with methodological orientation to work. The second set of rhetorics claim that organizations viewed as natural systems are, and should be, collectives, whose participants are pursuing multiple interests. Proponents of this

camp regard the informal structure of relationships that develop among participants, as more influential in guiding the behavior of participants than the formal structure.

The natural view of organizations has always had wide appeal on ideological grounds – organizations that emulate social life are generally more attractive than organizations that emulate machines. This appeal is further reinforced by descriptive studies which showed that organizations are shaped by psychological and social processes that are ordinarily found in society than the order and calculative rationality espoused by the rational view of organizations. This conclusion, however, poses a dilemma for managers. Descriptively scholars can agree that organizations may not be rational systems of coordinated actions, but from a prescriptive point of view the legitimacy of managerial action depends on striving for calculative rationality at both the organizational and strategic levels.

Resolving this dilemma has depended on arguing that the social is not at odds with the instrumental; that creating naturally occurring social reality within organizations is not only an attractive idea, it is also a practical one. Unfortunately, reality does not lend sufficient support for this position. There have been sporadic attempts in advanced Western economies to show that emulating social reality can result in superior performance, but these experiments were generally inconclusive. So while the rhetoric promoting firms as a natural social system was increasingly embraced by academics and practitioners (Barley and Kunda, 1992), it was not until explicit linkages were made to Japanese

industrial success in the work of such authors as Peters (1978) and Ouchi and Price (1978), that the idea gained greater credence outside the narrow confines of academic discussions.

Learning from Japanese management techniques became a fashionable rhetoric with Ouchi's work. Ouchi (1981), in his best selling book on Japanese Management, *Theory Z*, described the ideal Japanese organizational culture, as typified by lifetime employment, slow evaluation and promotion, implicit control mechanisms, collective decision making, collective responsibility, and holistic concern for employees. In contrast, he portrayed American organizational culture as characterized by short term employment, speedy evaluation and promotion, explicit control mechanisms, individual decision making, individual responsibility, and segmented concern for workers. Ouchi, *Theory Z*, furthered the notion that Western firms would benefit by combining the best of Japanese and American models. Western firms, could, he emphasized employ the Japanese style consensual decision making but maintain the focus on individual responsibility; have slow evaluation and promotion as in Japan; have Japanese style implicit control but with explicit measures; and promote holistic concern for employees. In what followed was an explosion of Western academic and managerial community's interest in unlocking the mystery and promoting a multitude of practices, Western managers could implement to benefit from the Japanese management style.

Making the contrast between Japanese and American organizations legitimized Japanese practices, and thus promoted borrowing and imitation. But

interestingly, Western observers of Japan were highly selective in the practices on which they focused. These practices generally had two characteristics. First, they directly linked to issues that were of central concern to Western organizations, and second they strongly exhibited aspects of the organization as naturally occurring social system. The example of Quality Circles provides an early and not entirely successful early example of this process.

Quality Circles

The introduction and subsequent spread of quality circle in the United States is a good example of how models based on natural social interaction are borrowed from Japan on the strength of economic performance in that country, and then spread in the United States on the basis of purportedly successful transfer.

Quality Circle (QC) programs are seen as pivotal in the Japanese superior approach to management (Keys and Miller, 1984). The Japanese idea of QC involved a group of employees who met on regular basis under the direction of a team leader, to identify and solve work related problems. Membership was considered to be voluntary and the employees often met on their own time rather than on company time (Wood, Hull and Azumi, 1983; Lawler and Mahrman, 1985). The voluntary nature of the participation made a strong impression on observers. First, because it was so much in odds with prevailing notion of employment and task design, but also because it spoke to processes that emerge in the wider society.

First tried in U.S. by Lockheed in 1974, Quality Circles were widely promoted by a number of practitioners as a tool for U.S. firms to regain competitiveness. However, when transferring this practice into the American context, major modifications were made in the Japanese style of QCs in order to facilitate the adaptation by the Reiker consulting group-headed by a former Lockheed manager. These modifications included: meeting on company time instead of after hours; creating the role of facilitator to implement and maintain the QC; and implementing an infra-structure within the administrative system (Wood, Hill and Azumi, 1983). In addition to these modifications of the Japanese QC practice, Wood et al. (1983) note that the American version emphasized creating a better group dynamics, human relations, and interpersonal communications. The focus was thus on shifting the inherently rooted individualistic culture to one which fostered collectivism and better human relations amongst the employees.

By mid-1980s, 90% of the Fortune "500" firms were estimated to have QC programs in their structures (Lawler and Mahrman, 1985). Yet, it was noted that within few years the majority of the QC efforts were in decline (Hill, 1991). Quality circles were considered as a fad. For managers, they satisfied their quest for new organizational practices in light of concern about America's competitive decline vis-à-vis the Japanese firms. In search for quick solutions, many firms seem to have embraced quality circles because they symbolized modern participative management. Lawler and Mahrman (1985) report that in a number of cases they studied, the CEO of the company had seen a TV program or read a magazine article praising quality circles and decided to give them a try. The

failure of QC programs is generally attributed to U.S. firms attempt to import this single element-quality circles-out of a complete Japanese social system (Gershenfeld et al., 1994). Transferring specific elements without sufficient regard to the wider configuration is symptomatic of more recent efforts which we discuss below. For the Japanese, the success of QCs is attributed to their embeddedness in the organizational social fabric which draws on familiar and other community based processes, but is not reduceable to them (Ouchi, 1981; Gershenfeld et al., 1994).

Knowledge as an institutional resource

The failure to obtain the same benefits from practices such as quality circles as had the Japanese pointed to the difficulty of transfer of practices from one context to another. Researchers and scholars were forced to acknowledge that transfer of specific Japanese practices was fraught with problems. At the same time, however, the challenge of Japanese manufacturing supported concerted efforts to discover the source of Japanese advantage.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, attention shifted to the area of organizational learning and knowledge. Japanese breakthroughs in process and product innovation were widely seen as a reflection of the superior learning and better knowledge mobilising capabilities. This interpretation fed into increasing interest in the so called “knowledge-based” view of the firm which emphasises the central importance of knowledge in providing a synergistic advantage not replicable in the marketplace. Increasingly, academics and practitioners have employed a

natural systems perspective when viewing the firm as a coordinated collection of capabilities, somewhat bound by its own history, and limited in its effectiveness by its current cognitive and social skills. Almost from the beginning, most analysts studying the knowledge-based view recognised the distinction between “know how” and “know what”, between tacit and explicit or codified knowledge.

The description of tacit knowledge is regarded as “sticky”, “slippery”, “elusive”, less observable, and less teachable than is explicit knowledge (Scott, 2003) was in sharp contrast to explicit or codified knowledge which formed the basis of rational theories of the firm. Since tacit knowledge is embedded in the skills of workers, sustained work routines, and dependent on shared communication and understanding, the management of tacit knowledge inevitably required a different approach than the one that had previously dominated knowledge management in specialised areas such as research and development, product development, marketing research, and so forth. Rather than search and invent models for managing tacit knowledge, managers and scholars once again reached for Japanese models.

Tacit Knowledge and Japanese perspective.

The term *tacit knowledge* goes back to Polanyi's essay by the same title, but it was Ikujiro Nonaka's (1991) paper that gave it rhetorical currency in management. The term suited perfectly the penchant of Western academics and practitioners to look to Eastern practices. Even the central question which informs Nonaka's work spoke to the issue of translation from the Japanese

context where corporations seemed to have mastered the problem of knowledge, to a Western one where centuries of understanding of how knowledge should be managed seemed to have run aground. Nonaka similar to his predecessors like Ouchi had offered stimulus to the rhetoric that had legitimated the reinterpretation of Japanese management practices embedded in the Japanese culture to fit the Western organizational context.

Interest in 'tacit' knowledge grew following Nonaka's (1991) Harvard Business Review paper, where he attributed the success of new product innovation in Japanese firms to their intrinsic recognition of sharing tacit knowledge, often indirectly by relying on metaphor and symbol in communication. He illustrated this with an example of a new product development initiative consisting of a new home bread-making machine at a Japanese electronics firm. His example describes a software developer who apprentices herself to the head baker at the Osaka Hotel, and accumulates tacit knowledge and subsequently shares this with his team. For Nonaka the lesson of the story is quite simple: "much as manufacturers around the world have learned from Japanese manufacturing techniques, any company that wants to compete on knowledge must also learn from Japanese techniques of knowledge creation" (Nonaka, 1991:97).

When academics and practitioners gathered at U.C. Berkeley's Haas School of Business for a forum on knowledge and the firm, Nonaka's judgment seems to be shared by most of the participants. The most striking contrast noted amongst the forum scholars was between the American emphasis on the distribution and re-use of explicit knowledge and the Japanese focus on establishing conditions

that encourage new knowledge creation through the direct sharing of tacit knowledge. Cohen (1998) mentions that Professor Hirotaka Takeuchi discussed the importance of recognizing the human and cultural dimensions of knowledge.

He described the Japanese view as one which gives people a process to create new knowledge, one that is based on socialization and favors the exchange of tacit knowledge between individuals. Cohen's representation of the U.S.-Japanese contrasts in the forum, one which he mentions may represent a larger contrast between East and West explicates the increase in rhetoric Western managers refer to when having a discourse on subject of knowledge.

West	East
Focus on Explicit knowledge	Focus on Tacit knowledge
Re-use	Creation
Knowledge projects	Knowledge cultures
Knowledge markets	Knowledge communities
Management and measurement	Nurturing and love
Near-Term gains	Long-term gains

Managing the Knowledge Challenge: Communities of Practice

The picture that emerged from description and analysis of Japanese practices in the West was one of an organizational reality wholly different than what managers in Western organizations experienced on a daily basis. While Western management was based on calculative self-interest, Japanese practices

appeared grounded in shared values and social cohesion. The contrast was not of major consequence as long as task specialization and formal coordination were considered as intrinsically effective principles, but it was clearly of major interest if Japanese practices could overcome the knowledge management problems confronted by so many Western organizations.

The rational view of knowledge management entails measurement and specific rewards for knowledge work. This is certainly in evidence in the field of research and development management, and in practices such as rewarding workers and managers for coming up with performance improving ideas. The main shortcoming of the rational approach is that it transforms knowledge sharing into calculative knowledge exchange. Prior to the Japanese challenge, the transformation was regarded as intrinsic to managing knowledge in organizations. Japanese organizations suggested that transforming knowledge sharing into knowledge exchange undermines processes of sharing that are based on principles other than those espoused by the rational school. More specifically, observers of Japanese practices argued that successful knowledge-based organizations depends on fostering sharing that is not motivated by calculative self-interest and explicit rewards. Such sharing downplays explicit job characteristics, extols voluntarism, and is strongly motivated by peer recognition. It breaks the relationship between individual performance and individual rewards, and instead looks to group affiliation and communal values as the organizing principles. The set of values embodied in these observations reflect the natural view of organizations. In this respect it was attractive to many in the Western

who have come to see the rational view of organizations as limiting and perhaps even de-humanizing. But it was also attractive in a forthrightly practical respect in that it promised to overcome the long-standing problem of barriers to knowledge creation and knowledge flow. The Japanese precedent legitimized experimentation to counteract the negative aspects of the rational model. And much of this social experimentation focused on the so called “communities of practice”.

The term “communities of practice” or CoP for the sake of brevity, was first used by Jean Lave, a social anthropologist at UC, Berkeley and Etienne Wenger, a researcher, who had joined the Institute for Research on Learning at Menlo Park. Their path-breaking analysis, first published in *Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation* (1991) and later augmented in works by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991). Wenger (1999) set the scene for the emergence of a stream of discourse promoting that CoPs had led to some significant innovations in practice within organizations. The notion, ‘Situated Learning’ draws our attention to learning that takes place in everyday life, including work places. The learning process, Lave and Wenger argue, is tied to ongoing activities and practices and these are done by communities of people through social interaction rather than by isolated individuals. The concept of a community of practice, as outlined by Lave and Wenger (1991) implies a group of people all involved in a shared practice

They illustrated it with five examples of apprenticeship, emphasizing that their notion of apprenticeship is not restricted to the historical idea of apprenticeship in

a trade. Rather they view it as a form of *socialization* into a community, where the newcomer gradually becomes a legitimate member of the CoP by learning the practice, the language and the conventions of the community by having access to and interacting with established members. Novices, thus, learn in real-time, and are legitimate members of the community of practice; they start off as peripheral but end up being more central. The point to note from a CoP perspective presented by Lave and Wenger (1991) is the emphasis placed on the social aspects as opposed to information and knowledge.

The apprenticeship process has a dual character. On the one hand it is based on a dyadic relationship between the knowledgeable individual and the knowledge-seeking individual, while on the other it is collective process which involves socialization into a wider community. For Brown, and Duguid (1991) the apprenticeship model points to a crucial aspect of 'natural' conception of learning as opposed to 'rational' models of the same. Rational models of learning separate learning from working: The context of learning is separate and distinct from the context of work. Community based models, by contrast, bring the two together. Coining the term 'learning-in-working', Brown and Duguid (1991) argue that CoPs can take the form of 'canonical' (or formal) groups or 'non-canonical' (informal) groups. Forming a viable CoP requires both, but the dilemma confronting managers is that while canonical groups can be directly managed, non-canonical groups cannot. There is a tension here between deliberately designing and implementing a CoP and the fact that the emergence of an effective CoP depends on voluntarism and a willingness to share that

cannot be manipulated directly. For strategic reasons management cannot wait for CoPs to emerge spontaneously, but at the same time there is a real risk that forcing the creation of CoPs will yield pale imitations rather than useful processes. Hence the challenge to management, especially to management that relies heavily on the rational perspective is clear: How can management go about deliberately creating non-canonical groups without destroying the informal processes on which the effectiveness of these groups depends in the first place?

Creating a Balance between Practice and Process

Until recently the response to this tension has been mystification. CoPs have been discussed and promoted as if they can truly exist alongside corporate reality while at the same time existing apart from that reality. For Seely Brown and Duguid (2000:4), this dualism is associated with the dilemma that all managers wrestle with: “the organizational tension between process, the way matters are formally organized, and practice, the way things actually get done.”

The example cited by Brown and Duguid to illustrate the tension between process and practice is that of reengineering and knowledge management. Heavily influenced by rationalism rhetoric, proponents of reengineering attracted huge admiration in the Western organizational circles, as it was driven by top-down, structured coordination of people and information, and assumed organizations competed in a predictable environment. It fitted the American

managerial ideology which has traditionally valued individualism and rational control trying to infuse predictability in the organizational work practices. However, the new rhetoric of Knowledge management followed the lead of Polanyi (1967:4), who pointed out “We know more than we can tell,” stressing the importance of tacit and explicit knowledge. Stimulated in part by the Japanese management practices, its proponents evinced a new approach advocating that organizations compete in an unpredictable environment. Managers, as Brown and Duguid noted can best nurture knowledge by responding to the ways people actually get work done.

The inevitable tension that exists between the practice and process is acute for managers who relish fostering tacit knowledge flows through community initiatives driven by collective organizational spirit. Brown and Duguid advocate that managers typically attempt to balance this tension by promoting a dualistic culture. For instance, they fuel innovation and creativity by promoting a select group or department within the firm. In contrast, they support well-designed structures and instrumental processes for employees involved in the routine work practices.

The question of how to balance practices and processes encompasses the ontological dilemmas that form part of implementing the CoP initiative within Western organizations. For managers to make a success of community initiatives within their organizations, they need to move closer to understanding the practice. This is not easy, as Brown and Duguid (2000: 5) have asserted in the context of explaining practice vs. process debate. First, there’s a divide

between what a task looks like in a process manual and what it actually is in reality. Second, actual work practices are full of tacit knowledge that the employees carrying them would have trouble articulating. If managers are to learn to use community initiatives, they must introduce elements of spontaneity, trust, and cohesion.

Spontaneity, trust, and cohesion fuel activities such as gossip and storytelling which are at the heart of the community. The first step to using these activities is to recognize them. Orr (1990, 1997) in his study had noted how the customer service representatives in Xerox would consult with colleagues when the problems were not covered by company's documented repair process maps. They would discuss the problems, test new approaches and solutions based on their previous experiences in their own time over breakfast, at lunch, for coffee. Exchanging these stories while socializing would become part of the community's store of accumulated wisdom. Referring this as the telling of 'war stories', Orr made the following observation:

Once war stories have been told, the stories are artifacts to circulate and preserve. Through them experience becomes reproducible and reusable. They preserve and circulate hard won information and are used to make claims of membership or seniority within the community....They also amuse, instruct and celebrate the tellers' identity as technicians. Such tellings are also demonstrations of one's competence as a technician and therefore one's membership in the community." (Orr, 1997: 26).

Concluding Thoughts

The influence of Japanese knowledge management practices is twofold. On the one hand, the Japanese precedent has legitimized radical rethinking of management practices which were strongly influenced by rational view of organizations, and on the other hand it provided models which experimenters could emulate.

At first sight, one can hardly quarrel with organizational experimentation and innovation. A rhetoric that appeals to naturally occurring social systems, especially when these systems are from societies which are very different, should be treated with caution. The overriding temptation, as Eccles, Nohria and Berkley (1992: 182) note, resides in the tendency of Western managers to be almost obsessed by a cult of the new: New ideas and practices are given extraordinary credence by virtue of reputation of the a particular country (e.g. Japan), company (e.g. Matsushita), manager (e.g. Jack Welch), consulting firm (e.g. McKinsey) or academic (e.g. Nonaka).

In light of excessive credence given to practices by uncritical acceptance of the natural view it is not surprising that the transfer of practices under the impetus of a natural view of organizations suffers from corresponding limitations. The application of Japanese models to a Western context has often involved the rational implementation of practices that are intrinsically linked to Japanese social context. Transferring Japanese practices to a Western context required translation - translation that required explicit stripping these practices of their

original context. To use Brown and Duguid's terminology, translating Japanese practices required transforming these practices into explicit processes. Explicit processes are intrinsically easier to prescribe and implement, but they are not the same as the practice itself. From the point of view of a successful transfer what is required is not only translation into process, but a further transformation back into practice. To put things differently, the transfer or more precisely the incorporation of Japanese practices into Western organizations depends first on taking what is natural in Japan and making it rational in the West, but then it depends on taking what is rational in the West and making it natural once again. There is no sign that this is occurring, at least not to the degree that it should.

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