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Two aspects of knowledge transfer: what every manager should know about using analogy and narrative

Nobin Thomas

Introduction

Organizational scholars continue to study knowledge as an important organizational resource, primarily owing to its impact on growth, productivity and survival. In fact, researchers in the field of psychology have a long tradition of analyzing the best way to transfer knowledge at the individual level. Despite our understanding that knowledge transfer can boost organizational performance significantly, recent studies have shown that knowledge transfer remains poorly managed, as organizations often fail to transfer valuable practices and capabilities (Szulanski *et al.*, 2016). One of the possible reasons is that knowledge transfer does not automatically occur. In this paper, I try to explore how managers as powerful mechanisms for transferring knowledge can transfer tacit as well as explicit knowledge through alternative modes. I focus on two modes of knowledge transfer – analogy and narratives. Analogical learning allows us to use our existing knowledge base to understand something novel through a process of mapping. Narratives represent a powerful way to convey information with emotion, explicit with the tacit, and the core with the context in an organizational setting.

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Analogy

When we are faced with something unfamiliar, what we often do is to find some resemblance to something familiar to it. In terms of knowledge transfer, it simply means we use a process of analogical learning. Scholars have tried to understand the theory behind analogy. They define it as a process in which we use a familiar domain (base) to understand a novel domain (target). The focus is on how knowledge gets transferred from the base to the target. The analogical process occurs through four stages:

1. base domain access;
2. mapping target to base;
3. moving knowledge from base to target; and
4. development of a schema.

The process starts with the access phase that requires activating the mental representation of the base domain and making it a potential source of information about the target domain. In the mapping phase, the emphasis is on aligning the content and structure of the base and the target domain such that the identified knowledge associated with the base domain can then be transferred to the target domain. The knowledge from the base domain then moves to the target domain in the third stage.

The analogical learning process ends with the creation of a new scheme that serves as a basis for future learning (Gregan-Paxton and John, 1997).

The base and target domains can be mapped both in terms of attributes and relations, and hence, this makes possible three types of comparisons. To cite an example, consider the case of generic drugs and their branded equivalents. The generic drug will have the same shape (attribute) and effect on the patient's symptoms (relation) as the branded drug. In a "literal similarity" comparison, the base and target domains are mapped in terms of both attributes and relations. However, in "relational" and "mere appearance" comparison, the base and the target are mapped only on the basis of relationships and attributes, respectively. One major problem associated with analogical processes is that errors can occur in the mapping as well as in the other stages. It needs to be acknowledged that only a subset of the knowledge associated with a particular base will ever be appropriate for any given target during mapping. Among the different types, transfer errors are more prone for "mere appearance" comparisons, as such comparisons are based entirely on attribute overlap. This is to suggest that the knowledge transfer process involved, or based on only attributes, should be seen with suspicion, as it may not be dealing with the core of the situation and chances of misrepresentation exist.

Narratives

Oral storytelling has been long recognized as an integral part of knowledge transfer within societies. From childhood days, storytelling remains a popular mode of knowledge transfer over generations. Lately, narratives have been considered an important part of organizational life. There has been serious research on the role of stories as a mechanism for knowledge transfer in organizations (Jain, 2016). An organizational story can be seen as a collection of detailed descriptions about management actions in the past, interactions among employees, and/or other organizational events. In organizations, it is common to find people talking to others about their experiences and ideas. Brown and Gray (1995) gave an apt depiction of how storytelling originated in the 1980s as a mode of knowledge transfer in organizations with his description of Xerox copier repair technicians:

The anthropologist saw that tech reps often made it a point to spend time not with customers but with each other. They'd gather in common areas, like the local parts warehouse, hang around the coffee pot, and swap stories from the field. The tech reps weren't just repairing machines; they were also coproducing insights about how to repair machines better. This discovery triggered a revolutionary change in how Xerox organized and managed the tech reps – no longer as independent workers but as a social learning unit.

Storytelling promotes transfer of tacit knowledge, as it leads to the creation of shared mental models. The development of general attitudes and beliefs has also been possible through storytelling. Indeed, storytelling is a natural and direct tool that enables the use of figurative speech to allow members to put together what they know and express what they know, but cannot say. Stories have been used in different cultures to communicate values and norms. To borrow from Snowden (1999, p. 34), "The use of storytelling as a disclosure mechanism creates a largely self-sustaining, low cost means by which knowledge can be captured on an ongoing basis – in contrast with a conventional consultancy approach which requires constant measurement and intervention by expensive teams."

The use of storytelling has not been without criticism. Though storytelling could be highly effective in transferring tacit ideas across to a wide audience quickly, in situations where skills-based knowledge needs to be transferred, storytelling has not been that effective. As an illustration, a pilot learning to fly a Boeing aircraft cannot perform only on the basis of

stories. Simulation would be a better mode of knowledge transfer in such a case. The surgeon can learn from the mistakes and success stories of other surgeons, but would definitely have to put in hours of practice with his colleagues to gain a deep understanding of the subject. Despite its limitations, the use of storytelling in organizations is manifold, as it continues to be used in communicating tacit knowledge, conflict resolution, problem-solving, organizational change, innovation, and new product development. This list is expected to grow further as researchers dig out new arenas where storytelling can be successfully used in transferring knowledge.

Managerial implications

- Most often, managers find it difficult to convey technologically complex problems to employees in a language that they best understand. Analogical learning can be an effective mode in such circumstances.
- Managers can use analogies to compare problems and transfer to the employees the solution procedures between comparable problems.
- Managers can use narratives as a powerful tool for communicating and storing tacit knowledge. Narratives allow articulation of emotional as well as factual content, and thereby tacit knowledge that might otherwise be difficult to share.
- The stories that dramatize managerial values and norms have a greater chance of being perceived and believed by employees than mere policy statements and rules.
- Stories help managers establish common ground with their employees and develop social relationships that get built faster and last longer.

Implications for research and society

- In research, stories gain currency when researchers translate charts, facts, and figures into an engaging narrative that captures the attention of the public and enhances its reach beyond the specialists.
- From a societal perspective, storytelling can become a strong tool for stating uncomfortable truths that never get told directly. By sharing valuable knowledge across generations, stories throw open the rules of the game in society and aid conflict resolution.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the theoretical and practical interest in knowledge transfer is enduring. In fact, the significant progress made in understanding the various nuances of knowledge transfer now translate to focus on areas that still have scope for further inquiry. My sincere hope is that this article will stimulate further discussions on the two modes of knowledge transfer – analogies and narratives.

Keywords:
Storytelling,
Narratives,
Knowledge transfer,
Knowledge sharing,
Analogy

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