



Book Review:

Reading Time:

3 minutes

Reader Benefit:

- ◆ Learn about what common knowledge is all about;
- ◆ Insights about how you can transfer knowledge in a strategic way;
- ◆ Buy the book to discover how to make knowledge-sharing in your company a strategic advantage to your business.

Title: Common Knowledge

Author: Nancy M. Dixon

Publisher: Harvard Business School Press

Pages: 188 pp, includes Notes and Index

Reviewer's Rating: ☺☺☺☺☺

Rating Legend:

***Inspiring* ☺☺☺☺☺ *Excellent* ☺☺☺☺ *Good* ☺☺☺ *Average* ☺☺ *OK* ☺**

Website Summary:

Sharing What Your Company Knows

This profound book takes the reader through the realities of knowledge sharing – and the reasons why it cannot be an exercise of “one-size-fits-all” – simply because no two organisations are alike no matter how similar they may seem.

Synopsis:

Sharing What Your Company Knows

Volumes have been said about today's pet subject: knowledge management.

In this case, the idea revolves around sharing what your company knows – in such a way that makes it hard for your competitors to copy your execution strategies.

Nancy M. Dixon starts the discussion by highlighting the three common myths or assumptions, concerning the idea of knowledge sharing. The author then proceeds to explain why these assumptions do not work, and why they need to be correctly re-aligned to achieve their right intentions in a practical way.

Detailed throughout are the actions that such exemplary organisations are taking to make knowledge sharing a reality. In the process, the reader gains practical insights and learns how their systems evolved to fit their market strategies.



Sharing What Your Company Knows

Book Review by Leon A. Enriquez

Volumes have been said about today's pet subject: knowledge management. And it's not surprising to encounter another book that deals with knowledge with a practical outlook. In this case, the idea revolves around sharing what your company knows – in such a way that makes it hard for your competitors to copy your execution strategies.

Nancy M. Dixon starts the discussion by highlighting the three common myths or assumptions, concerning the idea of knowledge sharing:

1. Build it and they will come;
2. Technology can replace face-to-face; and
3. First you have to create a learning culture.

The author then proceeds to explain why these assumptions do not work, and why they need to be correctly re-aligned to achieve their right intentions in a practical way.

This profound book is organised into nine chapters that takes the reader through the realities of knowledge sharing – and the reasons why it cannot be an exercise of “one-size-fits-all” – simply because no two organisations are alike no matter how similar they may seem.

And Dixon gives us real-life case study examples to show us how some public and private sector businesses are addressing knowledge sharing with results that justify their actions.

“Little personal benefit comes from contributing to a database that is accessed by others with whom I have no connection and moreover from whom I am unlikely to hear,” says Dixon who is associate professor of Administrative Sciences at The George Washington University. “A database is like a black hole. It gives nothing back – no thank you, no smile, no sigh of relief, no enthusiasm on the other end of the line.” Human beings feel a sense of gratification when they share knowledge with other human beings, not machines!



Dixon adds that the term “share”, which we use so frequently when we talk about an exchange of knowledge, may seem a strange choice of words, and somewhat out of place among such mechanistic terms of knowledge management as “capture”, “disseminate”, and “transfer”. Yet, the term “share” quite rightly recognises the personal nature of the knowledge that is gained from work experience.

Put another way, “what I’ve learned from my work experience is very much a part of what I am. To ask me to share it is to ask me to give something of myself.” This is the key differentiator of the knowledge sharing process, and of which the end-result is knowledge transfer to the “community mind” of the organisation. This is called common knowledge.

“Common knowledge is always linked to action. It is derived from action and it carries the potential for others to use it to take action,” highlights Dixon. “Whether or not others do take action on the common knowledge depends on the many factors I write about in the book.”

According to Dixon, the book’s approach is really the in-depth look at a number of organisations that are leading the field in knowledge transfer. Detailed throughout are the actions that such exemplary organisations are taking to make knowledge sharing a reality. In the process, the reader gains practical insights and learns how their systems evolved to fit their market strategies.

Dixon simplifies the knowledge sharing process with numerous flow-chart diagrams that illustrate key action steps. For instance, consider the example Creating Common Knowledge. The sequence in the knowledge sharing cycle:

- ◆ Step 1: Team performs a task;
- ◆ Step 2: Outcome is achieved;
- ◆ Step 3: Team explores the relationship between action and outcome; and
- ◆ Step 4: Common Knowledge is gained;
- ◆ Repeat the cycle by starting again at Step 1.

Following Step 4, a new knowledge sharing cycle would be:

- ◆ Step 5: Knowledge transfer system is selected;
- ◆ Step 6: Knowledge is translated into a form usable by others;
- ◆ Step 7: Receiving team adapts knowledge for its own use;
- ◆ Step 8: New team performs a task.



The author identifies five design principles or categories that facilitate the kind of knowledge sharing transfer as follows:

1. *Serial Transfer*: This applies to a team that does a task, and then the same team repeats the task in a new context.
2. *Near Transfer*: This involves transferring knowledge from a source team to a receiving team that is doing a similar task in a similar context but in a different location.
3. *Far Transfer*: This means transferring tacit knowledge from a source team to a receiving team when the knowledge is about a non-routine task. Far Transfer provides a way to apply those knowledge resources to costly decisions and problems.
4. *Strategic Transfer*: This involves transferring very complex knowledge, (such as how to launch a product, or make an acquisition), from one team to another in cases where the teams may be separated by time and space. Strategic Transfer is both very complex and very vital and cannot be achieved simply by “best practices”.
5. *Expert Transfer*: This involves transferring explicit knowledge about a task that may be done infrequently.

“It requires a disciplined strategy that is carried out by active participants who are intent not only on getting effective results but also on knowing how they got the results,” stresses Dixon.

The author expounds: “Without such a strategy, teams make the same mistakes again and again or, what may be worse, are not able to repeat a one-off success.” This sound advice will guide the reader in the quest of the knowledge sharing process.

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