

Appreciative Sharing of Knowledge

*Leveraging Knowledge Management
For Strategic Change*

Tojo Thatchenkery

George Mason University

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APPRECIATIVE SHARING FOR KNOWLEDGE
Leveraging Knowledge Management for Strategic Change

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To Tessy and Sruthi
in appreciation of their love and knowledge sharing.

Preface

How to manage knowledge effectively is a question that has run through the literature of the field of organizational behavior for many years. Knowledge has been examined from many angles: how it is created (creativity, scanning the environment), how it is shared (network analysis, communication patterns), and how it is applied (decision making, problem solving). What Tojo Thatchenkery has finally done in *Appreciative Sharing of Knowledge: Leveraging Knowledge Management for Strategic Change* is to help us understand a simple process for getting at what it takes to actually *improve* these processes in an organization. Although the “Appreciative Sharing of Knowledge” or “ASK” approach described here is focused primarily on the act of sharing knowledge, the methodology described in this simple but important book can be applied to a wide range of knowledge management challenges and opportunities.

Many organizations have recognized the need to improve knowledge sharing processes. People at Unilever, the consumer products giant, are fond of saying “If only Unilever knew what Unilever knew.” In every large, complex organization, the amount of knowledge that is actually shared and applied to organizational opportunities is a tiny fraction of the total knowledge that exists among members of the firm. Of course, information technology and accessible databases have done a great deal to provide people with access to facts, documents and other types of routine, transactional knowledge. We might refer to this kind of knowledge as “know what.” While “know what” knowledge is important, there is another kind of knowledge that is perhaps even more critical to organizations. We might call this kind of knowledge “know how.”

“Know how” tends to be more emergent and more tacit. It is best shared not through databases, but via interactions among people that involve explanations, examples, or demonstrations. Until now, leaders have been without an effective process for doing anything practical or powerful about improving the amount of “know how” that is transferred among members of their enterprise.

The ASK method described by Thatchenkery provides a simple method for discovering and strengthening processes that *already exist* in an organization for sharing “know how.” Because it is based on an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach, the ASK method doesn’t involve the installation of complex IT systems or forcing people to exhibit new behaviors requiring training or special incentives. Instead, the ASK approach uncovers things that people in an organization already do to share knowledge with one another and then seeks to involve them in experimenting with ways to strengthen those naturally occurring processes.

Thatchenkery illustrates the application of the ASK method through a case study of a bank that is concerned with the amount of knowledge it is losing each day as people retire or leave the organization for various reasons. Leaders of the bank recognized that in order to compete, they couldn’t let the knowledge its employees had accumulated leave the organization with them. They needed to find more effective ways to help people share knowledge while they were still employed. Thatchenkery explains that people in the bank were acquainted with techniques used for “retrospective” learning, like the Army’s After Action Review process, in which events are dissected to determine the causes of problems, but that they found these methods unpopular with employees because they seemed more focused on placing blame than on learning. The bank preferred an approach that would allow people to share what Thatchenkery calls “prospective” knowledge, which

is knowledge that they may need to be successful in the future. To do this, the leaders of the bank discovered that they needed to step aside and allow people to discover for themselves what worked, rather than mandating a knowledge sharing policy or procedure.

Readers looking for shortcuts need to understand that what is important is going through the process of discovering the unique practices that already exist and that are supported by the culture of each organization rather than installing an “off the shelf” knowledge sharing practice. Part of what makes the ASK methodology powerful is that people give the challenge of sharing knowledge more thought and in the process of doing so, become more committed to doing things that make it possible.

Sharing knowledge is a perfect target for the application of AI methods because sharing knowledge with others is a positive act. While there are those who are reluctant to share knowledge with others because they associate knowledge with power, the majority of people in organizations would readily share what they know with others if they could. In fact, most are hungry to do so. Hence, there is positive motivation to engage in a process like ASK that provides an opportunity for people to be recognized by others for what they can contribute.

Through the case, Thatchenkery demonstrates the steps that should be taken to apply the ASK methodology. While the chapters are short, easy reading, they still convey the importance of investing time and energy in executing the ASK approach. Like most other methods of changing organizational behavior, what you get back from ASK depends on what you put into it. The approach isn't hard to understand, and Thatchenkery makes it even easier to follow by ending each chapter in a Focus Box with notes for practitioners that reemphasize the critical points made. While some new language is introduced here (I personally love the idea of calling

internal consultants in this process “knowledge ambassadors”) the reader won’t be put off by too much academic theory. Thatchenkery gives enough background to acknowledge the sources of some underlying premises but doesn’t make it a chore for readers to grasp the essence of the ASK approach. Those interested in understanding more deeply concepts involving the social construction of knowledge or the building of social capital in organizations are referred to the appropriate authors.

I expect a lot from this Focus Book. The need it addresses is clear and for a change, so is the answer.

William Pasmore
Partner, Mercer Delta Consulting
New York.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Imagine an organization where you pick up your phone, call a co-worker from a different project in another division, state, or country to ask how she handled a challenging situation, and get an extremely useful response. This in turn stimulates a conversation that leads to brainstorming, solutions, and innovation. Plus, the cost to your division is only an offer of a thank you and the recognition of your co-worker: no lengthy, time-consuming research program, no unnecessary documenting of information. It is quick, painless, perhaps even fun, and people created instead of diminished relationships in the process. Change and learning occur through such relationships, creating opportunities for both the employees and the organization to grow while actively sharing knowledge.

Does it sound too good to be true? Not to Green Capital Bank,¹ a well-known financial institution that integrates an approach to knowledge management called *Appreciative Sharing of Knowledge* [ASK] to create a culture of true knowledge sharing that positively impacts the bottom line.

Knowledge management has emerged as one of the most active areas of research and practice for improving organizational efficiency and quality of life. Hundreds of consultants who had developed strong practices with re-engineering have redefined themselves as change agents directly addressing knowledge management issues that impair change in organizations. Organizations of all sorts, for-profit, nonprofit, and public sectors alike, have developed knowledge management strategies, processes, or practices, even if they don't recognize or acknowledge the changes they have made.

Terms like intellectual capital, knowledge industry, knowledge society, knowledge age, knowledge worker, knowledge creation, and knowledge sharing appear in all forms of business media. In addition, a new genre of professional titles for those responsible for knowledge management in organizations has emerged, such as chief knowledge officer, chief learning officer, and knowledge architect, adding credence to the need for knowledge generation and retention inside organizations. Occasionally, these efforts, as in Green Capital Bank, occur through the efforts of human resource, organizational development, or “learning” departments.”

This *Focus Book* will tell the story of this organization and the efforts of its learning department to create strategic organizational change through knowledge management. Knowledge management was critical for maintaining the competitiveness of the Green Capital Bank in the banking industry. The organizational learning department recognized managing knowledge as the most effective way for creating strategic change in the Green Capital Bank. Aware of the fast pace of change in the financial services industry, they saw the need to be proactive and think innovatively.

Though there is no agreed upon definition of “knowledge management,” the term generally refers to a broad spectrum of organizational practices, methods, processes, and approaches coalescing around the task of generating, capturing, and sharing the know-how, specialized knowledge, expertise, and best practices relevant to the core business of an organization. The following items are generally considered integral components of knowledge management:

- Generating new knowledge internally and accessing valuable knowledge from outside sources

- Representing knowledge in documents, databases, and software
- Facilitating knowledge growth through culture and incentives
- Transferring existing knowledge throughout the organization
- Creating awareness of the benefits of retaining knowledge within the organization as changes occur and people leave.

In summary, knowledge management has both technical and social aspects. The technical dimension has received most of the attention and resources leading to the development of hundreds of “KM Architectures,” essentially knowledge management collaborative software. Recently, the latter social dimension has become more visible as the technical side has matured and practitioners beginning to appreciate the “soft” people management side of knowledge management.

Why Knowledge Management?

What is the basis for this increased attention for knowledge management? Part of the answer lies in the belief that we are living in a knowledge economy or knowledge society where the primary exchange code is information-turned-knowledge. Those who have it, or have more than others, have a competitive advantage. Hence, if organizations want to maximize chances for success, they must have a plan for the creation, sustenance, and sharing of knowledge.

Knowledge has always played an important role in societal advance. In 800 B.C., Indian mathematicians built upon generations of knowledge to develop mathematics that is quite sophisticated

even by today's standards. Phoenicians were implicitly concerned with how knowledge about trade logistics and merchant practices was built, transferred to employees, and successfully applied. With such roots, claiming that we now live in a "knowledge society" as if it were unique is no more informative than saying that we now live in a "power society" or "money society" or "culture society."²

Knowledge management is rooted in many disciplines, including economics, education, information management, organizational behavior, psychology, and sociology. Knowledge management embraces the perspectives developed in these subject areas but operates from the basic premise of the tacit nature of knowledge. *Tacit knowledge* is personal knowledge rooted in individual experience and involving personal belief, perspective, and values. Philosopher of science Michael Polanyi (1967) famously characterized tacit knowledge as that "which we know but cannot tell." A key aspect of knowledge management is finding ways to apprehend the tacit knowledge of long-time employees, customers, clients, or other stakeholders.

Making good use of tacit knowledge, however, is a challenging task. Typically, employees may not want to share what they know, fearing that once they share their specialized knowledge, they may not be needed. Therefore, encouraging those who have tacit knowledge to share it organization-wide is vital. This book attempts to respond to this situation in two ways: first, by introducing ASK, or appreciative sharing of knowledge; second, by encouraging the important but often unrecognized and underappreciated potential of knowledge management for initiating or facilitating organizational change. I suggest that knowledge management is inherently embedded in change, particularly in the

dynamic quality of knowledge-as-a-sense-of-worth.

Knowledge is dynamically embedded in networks and processes as well as in the human beings who constitute and use them. In other words, people typically acquire knowledge from established organizational routines, the entirety of which are usually impossible for any one person to know. The acquiring of knowledge is, in essence, a mutually constructed activity. To build it alone and to keep it to oneself is to create a singleness of mind—taking away the usefulness of the knowledge, wisdom, and aspirations of the “knower(s).”

Philosopher of science and psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1999) suggests, “If we are to generate meaning together we must develop smooth and reiterative patterns of interchange—a dance in which we move harmoniously together” (p. 160). He suggests that to mutually construct our world, we must engage in a coordinating discourse with a significance of self-expression, active mutual affirmation, and regular recreation of our worlds (1999, pp.158-164). Within this conceptual framework Taos Institute bases its Focus Book, *Appreciative sharing of knowledge: Leveraging knowledge management for strategic change*. Appreciative sharing of knowledge [ASK] becomes an integral part of organizing—whether in the workplace or otherwise—when an invitation to bring together and share knowledge occurs. As the knowledge sharing gains momentum, the positive energy generated softens the *resistance to change* typically encountered in most change efforts and empowers individuals to positively impact organizational change. Throughout the book, this dual focus—initiating ASK and leveraging it for change—will be evident.

Turning Knowledge Management into Knowledge Sharing

In practice, knowledge management often encompasses identifying and mapping intellectual assets within the organization, generating new knowledge for competitive advantage within the organization, making vast amounts of corporate information accessible, and sharing practices and technology that enables all of the above, including groupware and intranets.

A common thread links collaborative learning and other recent business strategies: information and knowledge are vital corporate assets, so businesses need strategies, policies, and tools to manage these assets. Though this need to manage knowledge seems obvious, few businesses have acted on this understanding. Such actions typically range from technology-driven methods of accessing, controlling, and delivering information to massive efforts to change corporate culture.

Integrating Appreciative Philosophy and Social Constructionism with Knowledge Management

Combining the principles of Appreciative Inquiry (AI),³ social constructionism,⁴ and knowledge management, this book describes an approach called ASK—*Appreciative Sharing of Knowledge*. The goals of appreciative sharing of knowledge [ASK] are to identify the talents and competencies already at work in the organization, to locate what knowledge-sharing practices already exist, and to enhance the values and behaviors that enable knowledge sharing. The case study in the next chapter provides an example of such a knowledge-sharing paradigm and helps the reader learn more about locating and sustaining

knowledge that matters in organizations, thereby opening up immediate and future organizational possibilities.

A brief review of the key principles of AI, social constructionism, and knowledge management (the core elements and structure of ASK) will aid in understanding the logic, rationale, and basic tenets of appreciative sharing of knowledge.

AI is an innovative action research model introduced in 1986 that has become popular with a large number of organization development practitioners worldwide. In a thought-provoking article written in 1987, David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva propose that by focusing on what is working in an organization as opposed to what is not working, one can learn more about the “life giving forces” of an organization and follow-up with action steps to enhance them. During the nearly two decades since its introduction, AI has become more mainstream and has been used in an increasing number of issues and settings.

The foundation of AI lies in the established school of social constructionism and hermeneutics, the German philosophical tradition of the study of interpretation, expounded by philosophers such as Habermas, Wittgenstein, Gadamer, and Ricoeur.⁵ One of the distinguishing features of social constructionism is the linguistic turn that has prompted social scientists to recognize the force with which language shapes the course and meaning of human affairs. Social constructionists see language as the basic vehicle by which we construct the reality of our shared world. Sociologists Berger and Luckman’s (1966) well-known treatise on the *social construction of reality* revolutionized the sociology of knowledge discourse.

Two decades later postmodern thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida have strengthened Berger and Luckman's view regarding language and discourse as the force through which humans create the historical and cultural traditions that in turn create a *self-referential*⁶ (Lyotard, 1984; 1988) reality, that is, reality that derives its significance from the context and the interdependencies of the elements constituting it. Since then, well known social scientist Kenneth Gergen has adapted this way of thinking to the fields of Organization Science, Psychology, and the general discourses. He provides an extremely persuasive and accessible narrative of the linguistically constituted nature of social reality in *An Invitation to Social Construction* (1999).

Knowledge management—the third core element and structural support of ASK—is not about technology infrastructure or tools, though that is where most of the money has been spent so far, not surprisingly, since one of the distinguishing elements of modernity is over-reliance on tools. During the initial years of explosive growth of knowledge management, organizations worldwide invested heavily in knowledge management tools, adhering with the blind faith to the maxim “if you build, they will use it.”

New Assumptions about Knowledge Sharing

During the last five years, most Chief Information Officers [CIOs] of large corporations have realized that knowledge management is not about managing but about sharing. A culture that encourages knowledge sharing first needs to exist for any knowledge management technology infrastructure to work. The question then is “How does one create a culture of sharing?” ASK answers that question.

The following case study shows how the ASK process creates a culture of knowledge sharing, thereby changing the thinking of key stakeholders. This, in turn, creates opportunities for an entire culture to change to or adopt a more relational form not previously recognized as possible. This *Focus Book* distills lessons learned from this and other applications into a step-by-step process that an interested practitioner can readily adapt to his or her unique circumstances and demands.

Seven-Steps to a Relationship-Based Process

Appreciative sharing of knowledge or ASK is a seven-step approach and will be explained in detail in the next several chapters. The purpose of ASK is to give employees and other stakeholders of an organization the opportunity together to set a course of action in building a corporate culture that values sharing what is known and important. Chapters 2 through 8 provide the narrative of Green Capital Bank's [GCB] experience in utilizing appreciative sharing of knowledge. The chapters provide a rich illustration of how the ASK process worked for the Green Capital Bank and describe practical "lessons learned" and "reflections" about knowledge sharing from this unique case study. Following the narrative example, the text shows how the Green Capital Bank's experiences can be applied to or adapted for other organizations' successful knowledge sharing processes and anticipates results for other organizations.

At the end of each chapter, a box labeled "Practitioner Focus Box" highlights the major steps of ASK, so that knowledge management practitioners, organizational development consultants, and other professionals can use the methodology for initiating their own knowledge sharing interventions.

Knowledge sharing is of crucial importance in societal evolution. The survival of humanity has been attributed to many things such as leadership, the prevailing of the good over the evil, and political ideologies (democracy over totalitarianism). In this book, Appreciative Sharing of Knowledge [ASK] is added as yet another process of change that has positively impacted the evolution of industrial society.

Chapter Summary

The key question this chapter considers is: How does one create a new knowledge sharing culture as quickly and painlessly as possible? To help answer this question, the text provides a review of the current status of knowledge management, the historical development of it, and the various factors responsible for its evolution. Various stages in the development of the field of knowledge management, such as the over-reliance on technology, prediction and control, and the later realization that knowledge management is not about “managing” but about “sharing,” were also described. Knowledge management has been practiced since the onset of human civilization and therefore should not be considered a recent need or phenomenon arising only in the current high-technology society. Most importantly, historically successful knowledge-sharing cultures were appreciative in nature (Ehin, 2000).

Further, this chapter describes the creation of a model of knowledge management that would combine the principles of AI and knowledge sharing. The result is a new model of knowledge management called ASK, or *appreciative sharing of knowledge*. [The

acronym ASK is used throughout this book though its expansion, appreciative sharing of knowledge is also mentioned several times to help the readers remember what ASK stands for]. The chapter also touches upon the latest postmodern intellectual discourses of social constructionism, hermeneutics, and AI that support the various tenets of ASK.

Practitioner Focus Box

Appreciative sharing of knowledge, or ASK, typically consists of seven steps. The following chapters in this book describe these steps in detail.

Seven Steps to ASK, or Appreciative Sharing of Knowledge

- Step 1. Set the stage. Present the appreciative knowledge sharing paradigm and negotiate top management commitment and support.
- Step 2. Through paired interviews, elicit positive stories of successful knowledge sharing behaviors already occurring.
- Step 3. Identify knowledge enablers [KE].
- Step 4. Analyze the data using knowledge infrastructure factors [KIF].
- Step 5. Construct possibility propositions.
- Step 6. Consensually validate and rank possibility propositions.
- Step 7. Form an implementation team. Then execute!