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Title

**COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE AND HUMAN RESOURCE
TREASURES; THE PERILS ATTACHED WITH IGNORANCE OF
TACIT KNOWLEDGE IN 21ST CENTURY**

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Abstract:

The knowledge possessed by a person is an abstract phenomenon. The endeavor to manage knowledge in terms of creation and development needs cautious treading by the organizations. The aspiration of the knowledge owner is often implicit and hence the challenge lies in fathoming the minds and taking appropriate steps to capture the knowledge. There are three different types of knowledge; explicit, tacit and contextual. Contextual is objective specific and short-lived. Explicit knowledge is often a materialized form of tacit one. Hence, tacit knowledge is the epicenter of all the other forms. In order to harness the same needs multifarious change in the mindset and outlook of the managers at the helm of Knowledge Management. The role of government can be understood is also to be understood from various perspectives in fostering knowledge creation and its utilization. However, the most disturbing truths of organizations in knowledge management are hardcore patriarchal mindset and imitational culture at the top and middle level.

Introduction:

The evolution of mankind entails different piece of science and fiction. But, one commonality between the two fades away all the differences of opinion. The commonality is the conviction to live for a reason amid divergent environmental circumstances. The reason is to survive. And, divergent environmental circumstances are conflicting natural conditions posing a threat to human survivability. Nevertheless, man has survived, is still progressing and making his way out of the tight walk rope. What transpires here is the ability and application of human cognitive power to the continuation of betterment and progression. The question that arises here refers to the cognitive aspect of decision making. A decision devoid of agility in responsiveness and relevance to the occasion shall be supplemented by a better one. Humans do take decisions out of choices available and at times make the same with intuition and observations of the past. Fear of failure or resultant liability rarely stops anyone from moving ahead. This happens due to the 'cognitive power'¹ of different situations people develop and based on that the most viable option they undertake. Everyone enjoys some degree of awareness and ability to solve a problem that concerns their profession and environment. Hence, to say that information which equips a person does not create knowledge is temporarily a wrong notion. Information is the backbone of knowledge and if information possessed does not help in finding a solution to a problem can

never be a part of knowledge. For example, red light stops you and violation of the same shall invite penalty is information. But, finding a solution to the traffic congestion where red lights are minimal or nil is knowledge. However managing knowledge is a herculean task given the human element involved in it.

Everyone irrespective of age, sex, education and culture has got the ability to understand the righteousness and wrongness. Ability to find a way out and solution to conflicting conditions can be traced in all normal human beings. At times, animals also have their own set of tricks and response in a specific situation. This confirms the fact that every normal human being is endowed with some degree of understanding or the other. Having said that, the issue of managing knowledge in organizations of 21st century is diametrically different from what the same could have been in the previous decades. This is owing to the new set of challenges resulting out of the arrival of IT revolution in the world. Besides, the demographic shift along various lines in the world is another attribute in this respect. The traditional system of education was entirely Macaulay driven where a skill set to do an assigned task was the objective of teaching. But, the realities of the present century warrants more than Macaulayⁱⁱ system. The need of leaders, innovators and trouble shooters is becoming overdue. Further, knowledge management has become an ambiguous concept as different persons have treated it differently. The term management serving as suffix to the concept itself is not appropriate. Because, management smacks of regulative supervision and anything that throttles freedom of thought and expression only baffles creativity and distorts innovation. However, it does not translate to suggest the absence of stick. Knowledge pre-exists an action. It remains latent until given a room to emerge. The whole idea should revolve around the issue of how to identify, nurture, develop and deploy the talent. In this context, one is reminded of Douglas McGregor's theories of X and Y. The commitment of employees towards an organization is both inherent and at times dependent upon the motivating power of the management. However, the author expresses his disagreement on the philosophy of the management being practiced in the current context and that it has to be free from controlling and must evolve conduciveness.

Moreover, the gap created by the IT revolution warrants a change in the attitude and approach of the people already at the helm of affairs in the organizations. And, the pace of change is so rapid that keeping a pace with them is acid test for the practicing managers. In essence, the task of

knowledge incubation and its deployment in 21st century is a herculean task especially when the bosses are conservative and carrying hangovers of the last century.

The revolution ushered in by IT has brought about never ending technological facilitations with it. There was a time when people did not have access to the ocean of data available on web for free. The interaction among people was a far cry and now the same is available at the snap of fingers. Therefore testing and experimentation statistically and otherwise also is much easier and fast. Data available on internet is merely an intellectual spring board but when the same is processed it takes the shape of information. Application of information so gathered in solving a problem successfully is knowledge. Though, the presence of information is always there in some form or the other, but getting the same ignited and scratched up is done by technological underpinnings. And, once successful the knowledge becomes organizational treasure. As told in the previous paragraphs, it is always there and only the shape is different. There are two types of knowledge or understanding people have. One is tacit one and the other one is explicit. The later one is often expressed in the form of articles, books, write-ups etc. However, the first one is more important than the second. And, it is here that challenges arise. Tacit knowledge is based upon personal understanding and experience. Unless subjected to some test, it always remains latent from the eyes of the managers. For decades, organizations have focused and invested their resources on explicit form of knowledge. Though, there are reasons ascribed to such works and the focus was limited to the use of new technological gadgets for the storage of such knowledge. Knowledge in explicit form can be transferred through various media available in electronic and print arena. But tacit one can only be discussed face to face. There cannot be any doubt that tacit knowledge can catapult the companies to magnificent success. For this reason, the companies struggle to facilitate proactive confluence of tacit knowledge. And, the prime objective of knowledge management in organizations is ensuring the sharing and dissemination of tacit knowledge across departments and SBUsⁱⁱⁱ. Moreover, initially the attention of organizations is to make tacit understanding available into communicable forms.

But, caution must be taken in application due to ever changing nature of tacit knowledge. This happens because of changing experience and perception of the owner of the knowledge. However, whatever is the case, if the organizations use this jewel in disguise, with a little judiciousness, there can be wonders and this further can serve as the core competence for the generation of competitive advantage. The biggest drawback underlying tacit knowledge is its un-

coded nature. In order to ensure that the same is codified to the use of the organization, most of the managers spend their maximum time and the opportunity cost of such time is huge. Because, one can be sure that complete codification of tacit form of knowledge is impossible and to attain 50% of codification, wasting 100% time is costlier.

Some of the codified knowledge can be tested to find out its efficacy in solving problems. The codified knowledge testing and then sharing the same in the organization gives birth to another class. This new class is known as implicit knowledge. Having said that, the task ahead is to ensure the generation of the ways and means to encourage employees to come up with ideas. Whether the employees themselves take the initiative of sharing their understanding with their counterparts or management invites them to sit face to face, all this entails lot of complexities and challenges to the extent of disheartenment. The socio-economic structure in the world is in a state of flux and hence the so called patriarchal set up of organizations will no longer augur well in the changed environment where demographic and psychographic parameters have drastically metamorphosed.

Therefore, organizations in the new scenario will have to look at KM (Knowledge Management) from a different angle. This is further complicated by the changing benchmarks and standards in the environment. Changes so emerging make the organizations to change their objectives also. In order that objectives are achievable the following approaches or set of approaches often dominate the decision making:

- ❖ Competitive Advantage
- ❖ Innovativeness
- ❖ Improvement in Performance
- ❖ Shorter New Product Development Cycle
- ❖ Reduction in Redundancy^{iv}
- ❖ Reduction in Training Duration to employees

As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the explicit nature of knowledge is often only the symptoms of a more improved and filtered understanding to a solution. This is where the task of managers lies. Because the tacit knowledge which often remains internalized in the owner and rarely is exposed requires more than conservative managerial skill. The knowledge management is different from organizational learning which attempts to capture the learning gathered out of experience on the job by the employees and hence is a short term attempt to improve the book of

accounts. KM though overlaps part of organizational learning is greater in reach and scope and can be a strategic tool in creating an asset helpful in achieving organizational objectives through competitive advantage.

In the prevailing setup, the most common word used in KM is intellectual capital of employees. Organizations which focus on intellectual capital as an asset to improve the synergistic performance take their employees as first stakeholder and above customers. This is highly warranted in 21st century which feels intellect starved and whatever intellectual capital^v is there has a lot of options of its deployment in broad spectrums of the society. So, the question staring in the face of the managers in charge is how to retain such employees with unique intellectual capital and to adapt to changing market dynamics.

More than salaries being paid, a sense of belongingness and cross sectional interaction of management with the owners of knowledge is pre-essential. Such interaction may wear different shapes and hence may differ from organization to organization depending upon the objectives and managerial philosophies prevailing there.

There can be numerous ways towards KM efforts. Some of them are the following:

- ❖ Discussion Forums
- ❖ Formal Apprenticeship
- ❖ Training and Development Programs
- ❖ Seminars and Conferences
- ❖ Computer Supported Cooperative Work
- ❖ Group Decision Support Systems

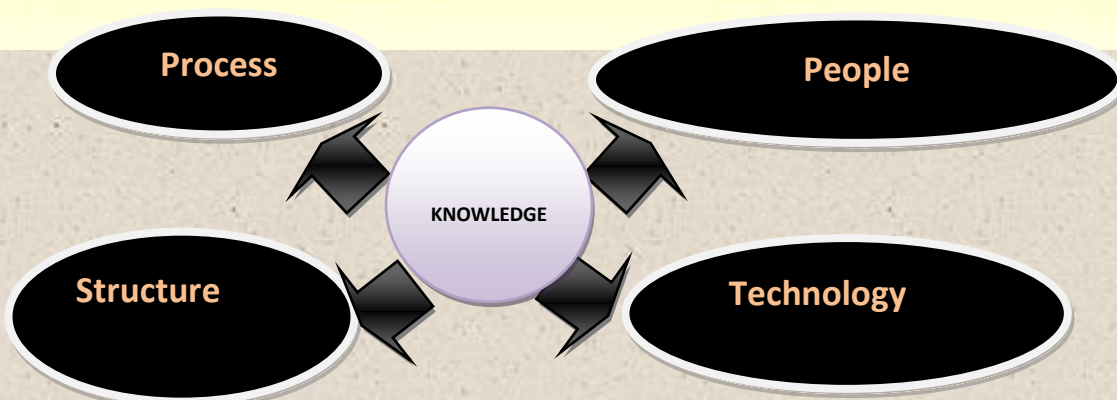
However, the major enabler is technology and employee support environment. Both of the two need rejection of conservative approach which has been dominated by 'patriarchal management'^{vi} at the cost of intellectual capital and creativity. Because, the demographic shift occurring in the world is ushering in the change in the behavioral pattern which in turn remains dominated by the people and culture they hail from. Successful creation, dissemination and retention of knowledge are critical to the efforts towards KM. And, any effort that distorts the above mentioned factors will prove deceptive. In-recognition of the people who matter in KM is a sure shot poisonous injection against organizational success. Not only this, technological up-gradation and awareness about their operability is *sine-qua-nun* in the present world. The interaction of the people with technological facilities has increased manifold, and it can be taken

as an opportunity to exploit and scratch up the latent knowledge which at times even owner remains unaware. When we talk of technology in this respect, the idea is extensive use of information technology with computer support. Continuous training and development programs shall help the management and employees to remain updated. Employees with internalized knowledge can be chanced upon computers and on other occasions where they are part of a discussion and interaction. Because, the fact cannot be denied, that when asked or invited to share knowledge or information about a problem, generally the idea or solubility does not come forward due to the inbuilt constraints which is beyond the scope of the present discussion. Knowledge about the knowledge is the biggest crisis. The gap is referred to as latent or tacit understanding. The conversion of tacit into implicit and then to explicit is serendipitous. And, therefore, the focus of the discussion here is the ways and means of tapping the untapped. In other words maximizing the benefit from intangible assets of the organization is the strategic action motive.

Though, there is not much academic or practical work done in KM, however, the crux of truth remains to say, that common sense in KM is much uncommon in the profit and non-profit organizations. There is no unanimity in understanding the commonality. The skill to understand human behavior and organizational competitiveness is all it takes to make an effort in knowledge management. Presently owing to pressure on academicians and market practitioners, the research on the topic has taken the following perspectives:

- Techno-centric Focus of Knowledge Sharing and Creation
- Focus on Organizational Design to Facilitate Knowledge Process
- Interaction of People and Ecosystem

Figure 1



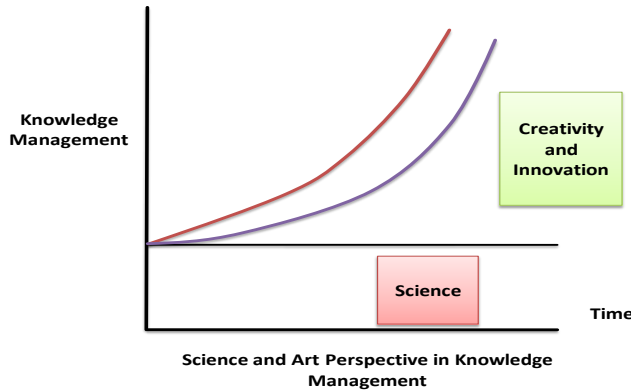
Core Elements of Knowledge Management, Compiled by the author

Since, ownership of knowledge lies in people, it constitutes 70% of contribution in different manners in knowledge creation. Attitudes, sharing, teamwork, motivation, vision, objectives and standards, etc are the drivers which exhort and entice people. Process and technology are enablers. Structure of the organization determines the extent to which technology and process can contribute. The contribution made by the three other components is 10% each (*Excellence Model and Knowledge Management Implications, Dilip Bhatt, 2000*).

There is another dimension to categorize knowledge along embedded and embodied directions. Embedded knowledge is part of a system which is designed with certain features of retrieving capacity of the same in the time of need. Whereas the embodied side of knowledge is a learned treasure of human individual. It is an outcome of human learning through formal and informal sources. Further knowledge can be exploratory in nature with innovation being the objective, or, exploitative of the established standards. The exploitation of knowledge involves transfer of the existing understanding among communities of different interpersonal levels within the organizations.

The diagram above depicts the contribution made by process, people, structure and technology in knowledge management which is nothing but the art and science of knowledge creation and sharing. The objective of knowledge creation is making it shared for further efficiency and improvement. Knowledge management is a systematic procedure to be followed by the organizations concerned as far as sharing and storing of the same is concerned. However, the human contacts and their mobilization generate the need to be artistic by the managers.

Figure 2

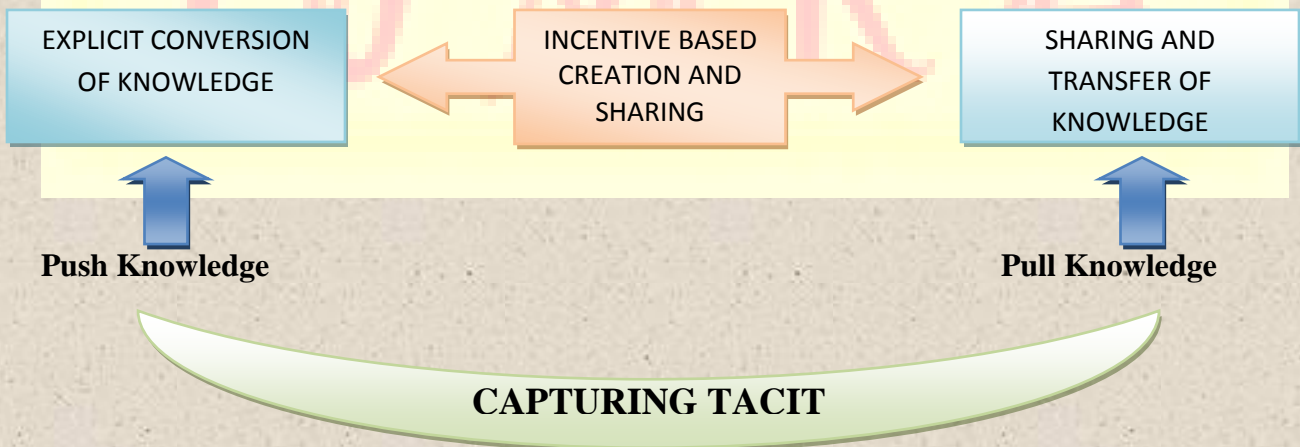


Compiled by the author

Like in economics, there is a fixed cost, beyond which starts variable cost, the whole exercise initiates with a scientific orientation in the process, as the time elapses, the role of procedures is taken up by the innovative capabilities of the managers in motivating and mobilizing the owners of knowledge in organization building.

Knowledge Management Strategies

Figure 3



Organizations that strive to remain abreast focus actively on codification of knowledge internalized among the individuals into an explicit form. The encoded contents are stored in a knowledge repository for the usage in future. This is attempted in the same fashion MIS^{vii} (Management Information System) stores the data and information. Knowledge lying in the subconscious part of the brain is wastage. And, at times, the inability to translate knowledge at right time and occasion creates opportunity cost to the organization. Mr. A knows the trick to solve a problem, however, he is not involved, and hence the situation can be an example of opportunity cost or opportunity foregone. Therefore, managers representing organizations believe in leading to the conversion into explicit form of any knowledge. This is called *push knowledge*.

The other form is *pull knowledge* where sharing of the information and knowledge is given the thrust. The experts in the organization or among the stakeholders are requested to share their understanding on a particular topic. The strategy tries to extract the available piece of knowledge in experts in the organization.

Knowledge can be created and shared through incentive based motivations. However, the veracity of such initiatives remains to be tested due the differences of opinion among academicians and researchers on the method. The question asks, is, whether incentives can trigger unique thinking?

The whole exercise and efforts in KM concentrate on capturing the tacit knowledge of the owners. As discussed earlier, the tacit part does not expose or emerge purposefully; it is a treasure which springs up at a place and in situations of unpreparedness. Whether, it is push or pull or it is other motivational aspects, the emergence of a thought or piece of knowledge is always tacit in nature.

Challenges of 21st Century

Dismantling Traditional Centralization of Knowledge

Handling managerial assignments in profit and non-profit organizations in the present century is very difficult. This is more so difficult due to the increasing empowerment of employees and rising expectations thereafter. A change in the attitude of the bosses is significantly more than required in the existing socio-economic and socio-cultural structure. There was a time when only one man or group of men were empowered to take a decisions or to conduct a training sessions.

It was 'top-down'^{viii} approach of teaching where knowledge and its transmission on specific occasion were completely centralized. In such circumstances creation and sharing of thoughts and ideas were unknowingly suppressed. This is also a pointer to the fact of emergence of new companies at the cost of companies that were conservative in approach.

The arrival of ever-changing and proliferating technologies has narrowed down the gap between the employees in different companies across globe. No longer can bosses in one company remain mum to the aspirations of their employees. Also, the inability of the managers will get compensated by the sharing and transfer of knowledge through the peers in other companies. The whole process is facilitated by cloud, the internet. It is an urge among the people to know more and contribute more that brings them closer to those who facilitate this. The traditional mind set needs be rejected and the patriarchal system be reviewed so that decentralization of knowledge creation and sharing could be enabled. The suggestion is based on the fundamental assumption that every human being does possess some degree of worth or the other.

People make products and technology facilitate the process. And, anything that brings people to the innovation and knowledge sharing table should be welcomed. In the modern world order, theory X^{ix} does not find relevance and managers should work on this presumption to thwart possible shocks. In this context, it shall be appropriate to comment that with the passage of time the knowledge stored loses its relevance fast and therefore creating, nurturing and capturing new knowledge in compensation of the vacuum created is highly desirable. The current socio-economic order is globalised to a larger extent. The multi-cultural pack of employees makes it further difficult for managers to deal with them. Companies like, Nokia, IBM, TCS and Microsoft and many others have carved out a separate department to help employees concentrate and innovate. They have started incubation centers too. The objective is to iron out cultural and structural differences if any in the organizations.

The result is also very simple to observe by the people. The above-mentioned companies periodically surprise the world with their unique products. Question of this surprise shall meet its answer in the pro-innovation and sharing culture nurtured in such companies. In fact mention must be made of the management philosophies pursued by Japanese as far as KM (knowledge management) is concerned. A philosophy that promotes team spirit and believes in team work is successful in fearless and seamless association of members for creation and sharing of knowledge. Japanese system has its root in the belief of open communication and well being of

the employees unlike individual excellence expected in US system. The innovativeness and invention is more pronounced in Japanese system than elsewhere. This is because of the sense of belongingness of employees and resultant creativity they have.

“Beauty wears on peaceful mind.”

...Thomas Hardy

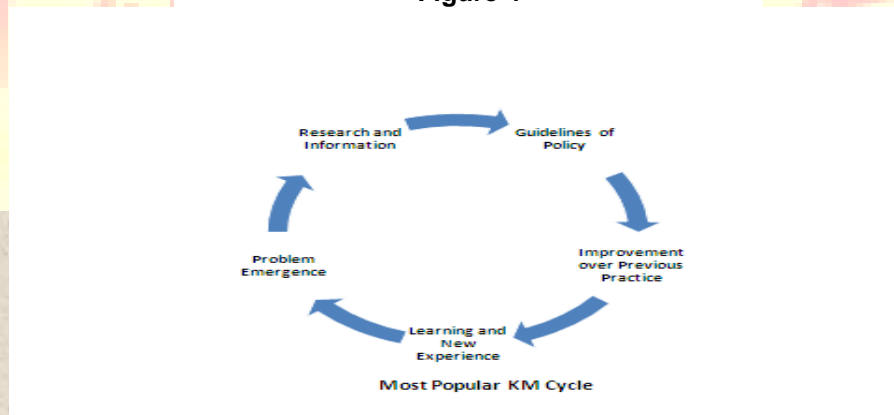
The above quote of is an excerpt from “Mayor of Casterbridge”^x. A mind simmering in deprivation and suffering from lack of belongingness will always be a source of distress and negativity in the organizations. It is in this respect that Japanese have a superiority edge over Americans.

Employee Contribution and Organization Performance

If we quote Peter Drucker, the century gone by has been successful in multiplying the productivity of manual workers fifty-fold. This to him is attributed to the unique management practices in 20th century. However, the most important contribution management is required to make in 21st century is to enhance the productivity of knowledge workers. And, the challenge lies here. The most demanding task organizations face today is motivating the employees to come forward naturally to share creation and innovation.

The answer to the task proposed is effective knowledge management at all the levels within organization. When we talk of effective knowledge management, the suggestion is never to stick to only traditional problem based knowledge management framework being followed.

Figure 4



Compiled by the author

However, the cycle in the above diagram depicts only the explicit side of knowledge management. The challenge is not only identification of problem and to solve it and learning from the same for preparedness in future. Also, the concentration on untapped and unforeseen opportunities in the form of knowledge lying as insights in the minds is a prerequisite.

Competitive Advantage and Tacit Knowledge

Explicit Knowledge if not updated becomes a Charade^{xi}

Organizations of the present century can no longer boast of their customer base and sales turnover as the factors of differentiation. The sustainable differentiators shall lead organizations to a competitively advantageous position. But, what constitutes to be sustainable differentiators is depicted differently by different researchers and academicians. In some cases, a unique product can be promising, whereas some companies believe that sole input or technology makes it different from others.

Despite, the fact that organizations possess differentiators in some form or the other, most of these are non-sustainable in short to long run. It is due to the differentiators being prone to imitation and hence their life cycle is generally shorter. In this context, the natural question arising is, what is that makes it unique and long lasting?

The answer lies in intangible strategic assets of knowledge among the employees in the organization. Innovativeness as a continuous phenomenon should be a passion to drive the achievability of objectives set by the organizations. The creation, development, sharing and deployment of 'critical knowledge'^{xii} will determine the success rate of organizations operating in the knowledge-based economy. Critical knowledge will serve as the core competency. The core competency as discussed in academic arena is inimitable and hard to achieve. An idea or knowledge if is unique can be a driver of growth to the company possessing it. However, mere presence of unique knowledge can fail in fetching growth if not utilized effectively and in time. The success and failure of organizations in the extremely competitive world economic order shall be determined by the speed at which knowledge is created, shared and utilized to produce breakthrough products and services. Because competitive advantage is short lived in nature and therefore, sustainability of competitively advantageous position has become a matter of serious attention in the corporate board-rooms given the technological flux to which the world is being

subjected. Further, a piece of knowledge in due course gathers obsolescence and hence, its renewal, protection and expansion are highly warranted. Otherwise, the competency so generated in the form of knowledge will turn out to a one-shot injection the effect of which fizzles out gradually. This is more possible in those cases where explicit form of knowledge exists and the companies carry complacency of their success forever.

It will be pertinent to comment here on the role played by tacit knowledge. The effectiveness and relevance of tacit insights in organizations is often more pronounced when it comes to idea generation or solution of a problem. However, as discussed in the paragraphs gone by, decentralization of patriarchal system is a pre-cursor to the actual operation of centripetal force in the organizations where employees feel at ease in transferring and transacting knowledge with each other. Proctor and Gamble, the behemoth in the FMCG^{xiii} industry across the globe develops most of its product through inside out. In other words, the scientists, engineers, doctors and other experts working for the company themselves generate the idea of offering a product to the market. Such synergistic approaches become quite common when a sense of honor of the ownership of the organization concerned develops, a culture that cultivates belongingness and commitment to the growth of the organization. Knowledge is knowledge and hence any subjectivity coming on the way should be discarded. Also, the method of learning to create knowledge can be didactic or self directed, nevertheless both should be encouraged and facilitated by the organizations.

Government and Knowledge Management

To a larger extent, the human resource management philosophies and programs are directed by the regulatory mechanism of the country under consideration. The conduciveness for creation and development of knowledge in organizations gets impeded and facilitated by the rule of law. And, therefore the job of the government becomes highly significant. Though, the government remains aware of the industry requirements but taking a decision and giving the same a legal shape gets complicated by a variety of other considerations staring in the face of legislators. However, the reality of 21st warrants the attention of the government beyond popular outlooks and hence bringing a change or exhorting organizations through legal framework shall be extremely desirable. The support and motivations to the organizations monetarily and non-monetarily also can be another millstone in process of effective knowledge management.

Conclusion:

Explicit knowledge is encoded treasure organizations keep. But, this codified knowledge is often prone to duplicity and imitation. Further, the stagnancy attached with such treasure renders it to be futile and invaluable. Therefore, the focus of knowledge management should be multi pronged. One the tacit treasures lying in the organizations should be facilitated with the use of experts of human resource management in the field within the organization and outside the organization. Also, an attitudinal change from top to bottom must be initiated to counter the shock if any arising due to changes in demographic, economic and psychographic variables. Second, the knowledge once captured should be quarantined periodically to thwart obsolescence and competitive attack. Presence of patriarchal mindset can be an impediment on the way to effective management and therefore, change in the mindset is highly required. Though, this change is not without a cost, however the benefits attached exceed it. In fact the author in this connection feels optimistic about adult ego state which settles down at ok-ok situation. In the present century where technology is always in the driver seat, requirement of breakthrough knowledge and ideas shall be required. Because of this requirement, care must be taken in justifying the relevance and accuracy of knowledge generated. At times, knowledge surfaced may be contextual in nature and therefore its usage and deployment may not fetch desired result. In the face of the above mentioned facts, the role of managers in charge of organizations has to be versatile and true to the occasion.

Endnotes:

- ⁱ Natural Ability to understand and diagnose.
- ⁱⁱ Lord Macaulay is attributed to have introduced the current education system in India. He was a British Parliamentarian. The system is debated to be faulty one as it only creates persons with limited intellect.
- ⁱⁱⁱ SBU stands for Strategic Business Units corporate run. The SBUs are the different units manufacturing different products.
- ^{iv} Reduction in Redundancy refers to the repetition which gets reduced and hence saves time and money.

^v Intellectual Capital is the work requiring high level of thinking, research and involvement like book writing, patents of innovations etc.

^{vi} A management philosophy dominated by traditional system of centralizing the decision making.

^{vii} MIS is a process by which information requirement for decision making is facilitated.

^{viii} Centralized system of teaching and training.

^{ix} Theory X says that employees on their own hate working in organizations.

^x A creation of famous writer Thomas Hardy which narrates the destiny which is shaped by the character.

^{xi} Useless

^{xii} A piece of knowledge which is inimitable and rare to have.

^{xiii} Fast Moving Consumable Goods like soap, shampoos etc used in routine lives.

Keywords Used

- i. Quarantine
- ii. Versatility
- iii. Tacit Knowledge
- iv. Explicit Knowledge
- v. Conduciveness
- vi. Decentralization of Knowledge
- vii. Patriarchal System
- viii. Core Competency
- ix. Competitive Advantage
- x. Technology Proliferation
- xi. Knowledge Internalization
- xii. Knowledge Incubation
- xiii. Technological Underpinnings
- xiv. Innovativeness

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