**Organisational Culture: Effects on Knowledge Management**

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For every voice celebrating the advances in project management over the past 50 years, there are two that bemoan the state of the profession in terms of high failure rates and repetition of mistakes. Setting aside debate over how we define success or failure, we can all agree that we can do better as an industry and effective knowledge management is a prerequisite for improvement. Here I present the case for believing that cultural norms within the profession of project managers may present significant barriers to learning to from and between projects.

Put simply, culture is 'the way we do things around here'[1]. Whilst we are all aware of the importance of culture, how often do we consider how our cultural values and norms dictate the extent to which we can leverage knowledge in project-based organisations? The graphic below illustrates how an organisation's culture, manifest in practices and cultural norms and values influence employees and ultimately how we treat, share and use knowledge [2].
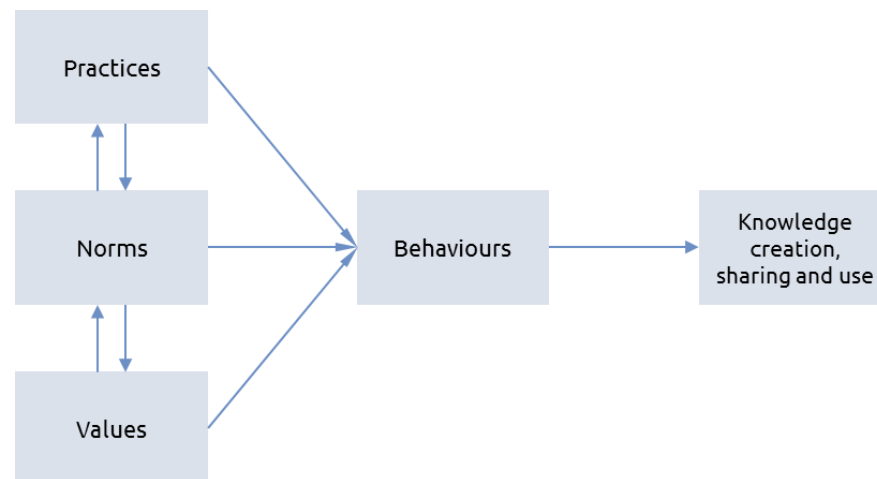
The following ideas, consolidated from the literature on the subject, may be worth considering next time you are discussing the approach to knowledge management in your organisation:

Lack of time

This is perceived as the greatest challenge to learning in most organisations, perhaps however it is not actually lack of time per se that is the issue, rather the cultural view of what is important and what deserves attention ultimately determines where time is allocated; it stands to reason that if knowledge management and learning processes are not embedded into the cultural bedrock of a firm (i.e. beliefs and values) then such processes will not be manifest in the top level of organisational culture (i.e. artifacts and practices) and subsequently, actual behaviour.

Natural reluctance to admit to one's mistakes

This is especially true in an organisational setting where performance is being monitored. There is acknowledgement of a 'blame culture' in project management that

is not conducive to effective knowledge management and learning[2–5], it has even been suggested that project management can 'punish failure'[6]. This reluctance to admit mistakes means that not only has an opportunity for learning been lost, the door has also been left open for others to make the same mistakes in future projects[6,7]. The extent to which team members feel they can be honest and open about mistakes and lessons-learnt is ultimately determined by the organisational culture[8–10].

No immediate value in reviews

There is widespread evidence to suggest that some practitioners simply do not see the value in engaging with explicit learning practices such as reviews and lessons learned activities[2,5,8,11,12], this being a microcosm of a professional culture that has historically taken a dim view of any activity that does not directly contribute to the progression of the task at hand. Such a view of learning activities may result in them becoming a mere 'box-ticking' exercise and being conducted poorly, focussing on obvious or context-specific observations that would be of little to no value to future projects; or the activities may simply not happen at all. This is related to the need for a 'desire to learn' in practitioners if explicit learning practices are to be engaged with effectively[13].

Defensive routines

Organisations can develop 'defensive routines' to counter threat or criticism[14], such routines are defined as: '...policies or actions that prevent the organisation experiencing pain or threat [they are] in favour of overprotection and anti-learning' and are embedded into an organisations' culture[15]. Many have noted this behaviour in organisations [6,16,17]. In a project setting, such routines may result in learning practices being hampered by vague responses, partial/incomplete disclosure of events and diverting attention away from negative aspects of the project[6]. This can be summarised as: '...it may not be simply lack of time that limits the use of reflective practices, but rather defensive routines that conspire to make conscious reflection and learning much less appealing to organisational members...'[18].

Knowledge isn't used

There is a large amount of evidence to suggest that even when repositories of knowledge exist, they are overlooked when a problem is encountered or a new project begins [13,17,19–23]. I believe this is a cultural symptom of a profession that is constantly looking at the next thing in the pipeline. The problem has been acknowledged by many academics and practitioners as merely a time issue, when in reality it is perhaps it is a deep-seated cultural norm of project management. The task-focused and goal-centric emphasis of project work keeps practitioners looking forwards to the next milestone, the next gateway, the next project... *ad infinitum,* with little to no time afforded to reflecting on the past. This unwavering focus on the future and reluctance to exploit accumulated knowledge is perhaps the biggest hurdle organisations face with regard to knowledge management and learning.

Innumerable factors affect an organisations ability to learn and leverage knowledge effectively; advanced IT solutions, virtual team capabilities, lessons-learnt and post-project reviews can all make valuable contributions to knowledge management. However any efforts will be unable to reach their full potential unless the organisation fosters a culture that values knowledge and appreciates the complex ways in which we learn. I hope this piece has provided some thoughtful insights for the way you consider culture and project management.

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