

Is it important to recognise knowledge?

By Shaun Maidment and Professor Dr Pieter Steyn

This article will attempt to illustrate the need for a renewed focus on prioritisation at executive levels, by discussing some of the critical success factors required to move an organisation to a learning organisation:

- The management or at least stewarding of information and the risks it may bring
- The value of focusing on the strategic value chain
- The importance of the Chief Portfolio Officer Steyn (2010) role in prioritising learning by reducing activity

Imagine you are walking on the beach at Jeffrey's Bay on a sunny afternoon with a light wind blowing from the direction of the ocean towards the shore carrying with it the fresh smell of the ocean. For those not familiar with the Eastern Cape region in South Africa, Jeffrey's Bay is the popular surfing town about an hour's drive from Port Elizabeth which is known as the friendly city, it is also a particularly windy city almost all of the time.

On your walk you notice a middle aged man dressed in a diving suit collecting starfish from the rocks. Intrigued by his actions you approach him in a friendly manner, enquiring what he may be doing. He greets you and responds with energy and enthusiasm about his newly found inspiration in life. He wants to make a difference by returning the starfish to the ocean. After sharing some thoughts around saving starfish and the alternative method of simply throwing them back into the ocean you sense his frustration with your questioning.

You greet him with a good luck gesture and retreat to the sandy dunes thinking about what just transpired. Like you, clearly this man has also read the story about the starfish, Barker (2010), and was also inspired by the idea of making a difference. As you ponder on the story about the starfish you feel slightly guilty about questioning the methods of your new acquaintance but never the less, you continue your stroll along the beach. Upon your return past the point where you acquainted the man in the diving suite you find rescue vehicles and rescue divers instead.

It turns out the man in the diving suit drowned. This may indicate that returning starfish to the ocean by means of diving is riskier than he anticipated. Perhaps returning them by throwing them back may be less risky?

It also turns out that the police found several bags of illegally harvested abalone at the diving point.

This story of course is made up with the specific purpose of deceiving you. Other stories in your project team (and life) probably don't exist for this purpose. They may however exist for a different purpose. It is obvious from this story however that we all have different perspectives on projects (and life) and that we all as Taleb (2008) points out, place too much emphasis on what we know or think we know.

Knowledge, being "facts, information and skills acquired through experience or education" according to the Online Oxford Dictionary (2011), presents many challenges due to perspective. Adding to this conundrum is the complexity that at any given point there probably is so much information available that it will be impossible to determine what information to actually use to facilitate any planning or decision making. According to Gladwell (2007) it is exactly this abundance of information which incapacitates anyone who wishes to use this abundance of information to manage risk.

This story also illustrates a critical element in projects (and life). That priorities matter and those priorities will lead to different ways of acquiring, using and sharing knowledge. The priority of the diver was clearly not that of whoever else may have been walking on the beach, but it was rather too easy to assume that it was. He was clearly not interested in acquiring any knowledge (or at least the knowledge one would think) at that point in time and neither was he willing to share some of his knowledge. He was however applying some knowledge (diving) and in a strange way he did share some knowledge (starfish and a different approach to returning them to the ocean). And in an even stranger way he acquired new knowledge (drowning).

Perspective plays an even greater role when you consider the fact that the diver could have shared his starfish knowledge with any number of people and had some or all of those who he shared it with not seen his fate they may even consider attempting a similar approach. This then begs the question, is what the diver shared then really knowledge since it may turn out to be relatively useless for some or all of the recipients of this knowledge.

Steyn (2010) emphasises the need to create learning organisations through the creation of programme management structures that focus on the customer value chain. Steyn (2010) suggests a renewed focus on the supply chain, an integral component to organisational success. Like Steyn, Shook (2008) suggests that organisations must focus on specifics in order to guide individuals to a sustainable continuous improvement culture. It can therefore be argued that perhaps the key to successfully managing the knowledge in an organisation may be to create a learning organisation, an organisation created with a learning directive from executive level down.

As a recent IBM Chief Executive Study (IBM, 2008) points out, most executives anticipate an even greater complexity in their business environment and with a greater complexity comes greater risk and more opportunity. Perrow (1984) point out that with increased complexity there is an increased chance of what he terms a normal accident. A normal accident being one that takes place not due to a single

event, but rather due to a series of small and sometimes related but often also unrelated events.

The environment will become more complex and the volume of information is likely to increase and as Maxwell (2007) points out time can't be managed but instead requires people to manage themselves within the constraints of time.

It therefore makes sense to start with the basics and focus on doing less and doing it properly. Covey (1999) in his *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* demonstrated the importance of putting 1st things 1st and, based on the importance of becoming a learning organisation, the focus of many an organisation must be exactly that.

Steyn (2010) promotes the use of the Chief Portfolio Officer role as a means to assist in prioritisation given the increasingly complex organisational environment. It is this increased focus on doing only what is required to harvest the potential of project and programme teams that will spur organisations into solving some of the world's most demanding challenges. The challenge of complexity and having too much information may in fact be solved by simplicity. Simplicity in the sense of being able to distinguish what is needed and what may be less needed. All of which requires time which is in finite supply but in infinite demand. Stop fixing that which is not broken

It is therefore imperative to recognise knowledge. Knowledge brings insight and wisdom.

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