

KM and Asian Cultures

Are there advantages and disadvantages when sharing knowledge in the East?

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With only a few exceptions such as *Nonaka, Takeuchi and Choo*, many of the world's leading KM gurus are from the West -- *Prusak* and *Davenport* (US), *Sveiby* and *Edvisson* (Sweden), *Snowden* (UK) and *Saint-Onge* (Canada). While there are research institutes in non-Western countries researching KM, such as *Nomura Research Institute (Japan)* and *Singapore Institute of Management (Singapore)*, those KM research institutes assuming the highest profile internationally are headquartered in western countries.

While it may be inevitable that these western KM gurus and institutions continue shaping the global KM developments, to what extent do their ideas challenge Asian cultures? What are the strengths of Asian cultures that would help Asian organizations to manage knowledge effectively?

Strengths

Group Orientation

The essence of KM is “*knowledge sharing*”. Sharing is a group activity. Generally speaking, Asians are brought up to appreciate group benefits and learn how to communicate in a group setting. Their identity is very much defined in terms of their relationship to a group such as family, school or employer.

The Japanese life employment system would be a good example to illustrate how the Asian group-oriented mentality facilitates knowledge sharing. Part of the Japanese convention is that most Japanese spend more than thirty years with an employer. “The employer/employee relationship is like that between a father and a son”. Relationships among peers resemble those between siblings. In general, *people* regard the “organization that they work for as a big family”. Such culture is conducive for building trust among colleagues which could facilitate the socialization process in knowledge sharing. Of course, the Japan's economic difficulties have resulted in a gradual disappearance of this life employment system, which calls into question whether Japanese will feel comfortable adapting to another group (a new employer) and sharing knowledge with new colleagues.

Tradition of Respecting Knowledge

Asian cultures value education and knowledge. “Also in traditional Chinese social stratification, scholars were ranked at the top” -- well above businessmen and landowners. For instance, the fact that Asian-Americans often have higher GPAs and are more likely to go to four-year colleges than Caucasian-Americans is due to the Asian cultural emphasis on academic success, according to studies.

Passing wisdom through Generations or among Ancestral Clans

“Asian families spend more time together than their western counterparts”. In Asian families, there is the *tradition* of passing wisdom through generations, not just from children to parents, but also from grandparents to grandchildren, aunts to nieces, etc., often with extended families living under one roof. “The knowledge passed is mostly about life experiences such as interpersonal relations, self-cultivation, choosing marital partners, schooling or even managing business relationships” -- which could be seen as the "best practices" within that extended family.

Such knowledge sharing could even extend to individuals or families with the same ancestral home. For example, a group of families in Thailand whose ancestors are from Chiu Chow, China, might get together to talk about business practices or networking strategies. They may even network with the Chiu Chow clan living in Hong Kong, Singapore or other places.

Challenges

Hierarchy Conscious

Most Asian cultures retain more hierarchical structures and traditions than those in the West. Knowledge sharing in families, among clans and between groups could be limited due to one's position in the social hierarchy. For instance, Japanese are taught at a very early age "know your place". Their behavior as adults is also very much guided by this principle. Most Japanese are educated to learn through the seniority system as early as primary school. Senpai (seniors) teach and train their kouhai (juniors) in school sports and activities clubs and earn the latter's respect. This seniority system extends to the office when they start working. Senpai lead and teach kouhai in organizations and there is much socialization between them in the form of the seniors passing on their knowledge and experiences to the juniors. Juniors are expected to follow seniors' advice (though this is gradually changing as some younger Japanese are more exposed to foreign ideas through study, travel and mass media). Junior staff may not be willing to disagree with their seniors. This may lessen the possibility of creating positive results or innovative ideas through "creative friction."

Similar things happened in Singapore, where the country's traditionally paternalistic governance style may discourage the diversity and creativity so important in the Knowledge Age.

A possible solution: Learn to appreciate that disagreement may not be a sign of disrespect but just a positive way to generate more ideas. Respect should not be taken to mean total obedience. The Singaporean government announced earlier this year that innovation

should be made an important item on its national agenda to enhance its competitiveness. Nurturing innovation would involve considering new ideas, which may result in challenging the government's conventional beliefs.

Saying Things "Nicely"

Generally speaking, being sharp and straightforward may not be highly valued in many Asian social occasions. In Japanese and Thai cultures, for instance, people seldom say "No" for fear of making the other person lose face. The Asian tradition favors indirect hinting and an accommodating conversational style. Ethnic makeup of the population also explains the resulting subtlety in communication. In a homogeneous society like Japan, where most of the population is made up of ethnic Japanese, even a few subtle clues from one Japanese are sufficient for others to understand a situation because they share the same cultural upbringing.

Besides, while Americans may see someone expressive as a sign of confidence, Asians may view this as being too "talkative or vain" (trying to overshadow others, related to group oriented culture). This may not be conducive to effective knowledge sharing because honest and open discussion of ideas would facilitate the flow of knowledge as a social process.

A possible solution: Learn to appreciate the advantages of straightforward conversational style. It saves more time than subtlety, which could even result in misunderstanding. Adopting a more open communication style would involve Asians adapting to the KM essence of knowledge sharing.

Education System Emphasizes Rote Memorization

The education systems in many Asian cultures (e.g. Korea, Japan, Taiwan and China) emphasize rote memorization rather than cultivation of original and creative ideas and independent thinking. Originality and independence are qualities that may not be seen as compatible to the group oriented Asian cultural tradition.

The KM movement is very much about managing knowledge in such a way so as to generate value for organizations. Part of the value lies in innovation which is usually the product of creative and original individuals. Asian students may not be as creative as their counterparts in countries such as the U.S., Canada and France.

A possible solution: Change the way of teaching, setting assignments and evaluation. For instance, instead of asking students to list reasons accounting for Japan's participation in the Second World War, set an assignment for students to imagine what Japan would be like in ten years time or predict how young Japanese feel about the War twenty years from now.

[Quoted from; Shirley Chan is a co-founder of the New Zealand Knowledge Management Network and a Researcher with the School of Information Management, Victoria University of Wellington. She can be reached at ecommercepolicy@lycos.com. Bonnie Ng is a Tokyo-based scientist. She has recently written for the Hong Kong Jockey Club, one of the oldest social clubs in Hong Kong].