

A review of
Common Knowledge by Nancy Dixon,
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Rating: 9*

Nancy Dixon looked at how knowledge moves around in organizations. More specifically she looked at how some organizations deliberately move knowledge around. Her conclusion: there are essentially five ways:

“I have used these criteria – who the intended receiver is, the nature of the task, and the type of knowledge to be transferred – to develop five categories of knowledge transfer, each of which requires different design elements to make the transfer successful. *Serial Transfer ... Near Transfer ... Far Transfer ... Strategic Transfer ... Expert Transfer.*”

First she lays out the groundwork by examining several broadly held assumptions about knowledge transfer. These include the notion that if you build something people will automatically use it; that technology can supplant face-to-face interaction; and that an organization needs first to create a learning culture and then move into the knowledge transfer world. She concludes that these assumptions work sometimes, but not always. Most importantly, people will contribute if asked -- especially by a colleague -- in a specific circumstance. But people are unlikely to simply ‘write it up’ and send it off to never-never-land in the form of some faceless database. Why? Because the database gives you nothing in return. No gratitude, no palpable sense of relief, no enthusiasm, nothing.

Dixon focuses on a particular kind of knowledge: “The common knowledge that is generated internally, by talented employees in the act of accomplishing the organization’s tasks in new and innovative ways, is where knowledge sharing can really pay off.” That is, the knowledge acquired by the organization’s people doing the organization’s business is most easily leveraged across the organization.

Well, if that’s all it takes, why don’t more organizations engage in this sort of practice? Dixon explains: “It takes a certain amount of *intention* to create knowledge of an experience. This involves a willingness to reflect back on actions and their outcomes before moving forward. In an organization with a bias for action, the time for reflection may be hard to come by. And when it is a team rather than an individual that has produced the outcomes, the task of translating

* The Official Ayers Rating Scale goes from 1-10. Anything lower than 6 is thrown out. This produces a net scale from 6-10.

experience into knowledge is compounded, because all the team members have to come to some understanding of what happened and why. Many organizations allot no time to debriefing a project team or reviewing a just completed event.” Hence, knowledge transfer is much talked about, but little practiced.

For each of her five categories of knowledge transfer, Dixon offers an example from a real world organization. For instance, for Serial Transfer she describes the U.S. Army’s After Action Review: “After Action Reviews have standardized three key questions: What was supposed to happen?, What happened?, and What accounts for the difference?” The goal in Serial Transfer is for the same team to be smarter next time it faces a similar routine task in a different setting. This category differs fundamentally from, say, Near Transfer (the example is Ford Motor Company) where the goal is for another team doing a similar routine task to be smarter next time. And that, in turn, differs from Far Transfer (the example is British Petroleum) where the goal is for a team doing non-routine work in another part of the organization to be smarter.

Dixon points out that several shifts happen when an organization becomes intentional about sharing what it knows across a variety of internal boundaries. “The first is a shift from thinking of experts as the primary source of knowledge to thinking that everyone engaged in work tasks has knowledge someone else could use to advantage. The second is a shift from thinking of knowledge as residing with individuals to thinking of knowledge as embedded in a group or community. The third is a shift from thinking of knowledge as a stable commodity to thinking of knowledge as dynamic and ever changing.” Everyone knows something, much of what we know belongs to a community of people, what we know is dynamic.

In the closing chapter, Dixon suggests that a comprehensive system for knowledge transfer must integrate six different elements. These include how the knowledge serves the larger purposes of the organization and how the system is monitored. And she offers an outline for creating such a system. The steps begin with selecting an organizational unit which has a pre-existing interest in sharing knowledge, moving through clarifying the goals and the relevant knowledge components to serve those goals, and identifying an informal scheme which can be enhanced and strengthened.

Throughout the book Dixon returns frequently to a couple basic tenets. The first of these is that people enjoy sharing what they know in the context of ‘citizenship’ within the organization. The second is that knowledge transfer must be viewed as a means to organizational success and not as an end in itself. Intentional knowledge transfer builds on this foundation.