

Striking up a new kind of ‘Dialogue’

In the first of a series of articles, ASIAN-MENA COUNSEL looks at silo-busting within both law firms and corporations. It is a well-known fact that operating in cell-like structures or silos can stymie cohesive thought and can lead to territorial behaviour. To combat this sense of isolation, knowledge-sharing expert *Bill Proudfit*¹ discusses the importance of the ‘Bohm Dialogue’ as a possible solution to enhancing productivity and building relationships in the workplace. Here we take a look at how knowledge sharing and the ‘Bohm Dialogue’ can break down barriers and encourage frank exchanges in (legal) organisations.

“The art of management is managing knowledge. That means we do not manage people per se, but rather the knowledge that they carry. Leadership means creating the conditions that enable people to produce valid knowledge and to do so in ways that encourage personal responsibility.”²

Neither external nor in-house counsel have problems producing knowledge. However, sharing that knowledge is rather more difficult. Clearly, professional maturity includes a willingness to share knowledge and information. External or in-house counsel may be willing, but actual facilitation can be difficult and thus the sharing of knowledge is often not very effective.

Learning about knowledge

Knowledge is slippery. Dave Snowden³ has recorded seven principles that frame the issues concisely when capturing and sharing knowledge.

1. Knowledge can only be volunteered, it cannot be conscripted.
2. We only know what we know when we need to know it.
3. In the context of real need, few people will withhold their knowledge.
4. Everything is fragmented.
5. Tolerated failure imprints learning better than success.
6. The way we know things is not the way we report we know things.
7. We always know more than we can

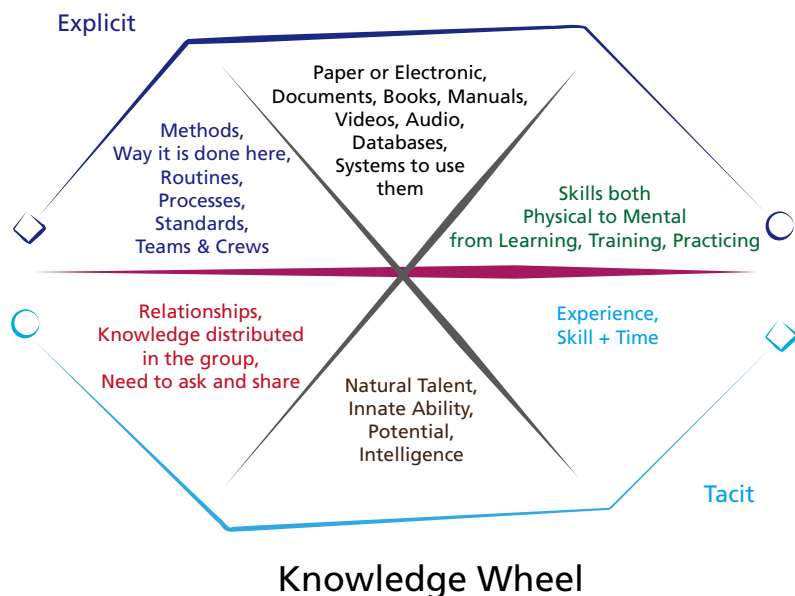
say, and we will always say more than we can write down.

The Knowledge Wheel and the ASHEN Framework

The Knowledge Wheel is based on Patrick Lambe’s video⁴ on how to conduct a knowledge audit. Lambe introduced the concept of the Knowledge Wheel which comprised six concepts: Documents, Natural Talent, Experience, Skills, Methods, and Relationships. The Knowledge Wheel also owes a nod to Dave Snowden’s ASHEN

Framework.⁵ The ASHEN Framework is used to identify knowledge assets. ASHEN stands for Artifacts, Skills, Heuristics, Experience and Natural Talent. Artifacts are things produced by people, which include documents. Skills include expertness or practiced ability. Heuristics are methods that people use to do work. Experience is an ability acquired through time. And Natural Talent is an ability that is difficult to emulate.

The explicit knowledge/ tacit knowledge distinction is fluid much of the time



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which is what the Knowledge Wheel is trying to show with the blurry lines and white space. Explicit knowledge may not always be as concrete as a document but this knowledge could become a document, webpage, audio or visual podcast very easily. Tacit knowledge may not be as ephemeral as ideas, thoughts or hunches since many people have good skills and tools to help them describe and share this knowledge with others.

The Explicit side of “Methods, Way it is done here, Routines, Processes, Standards, Teams & Crews” has the flip Tacit side which consists of “Relationships, Knowledge distributed in the group, Need to ask and share”. Knowledge sharing in these areas is likely to be most fraught with missteps, frustration, broken promises and failed information technology initiatives. How does a law firm share this knowledge between partners, between partners and associates and between associates, internal business professionals (business development and marketing professionals, human resources and financial managers)? How do in-house counsel facilitate the sharing of knowledge within the business organisation? How do external counsel begin to understand the business of their client, namely, in-house counsel? Here are some knowledge-sharing approaches that will aid in these difficult tasks.

The distinctions between mentoring, coaching and shadowing

Mentoring, Coaching and Shadowing are all processes that place experienced people alongside less experienced people. Mentoring may include more than one experienced person, but never more than

three, who meet regularly with a less experienced person to instill guidance, development and to facilitate knowledge transfer. Generally speaking, the mentors should not be a supervisor to the less experienced person in any capacity. Mentoring is an opportunity to ask questions and give advice and mentoring can go on for quite some time.

Coaching is more focused on a task and may be part of correcting some perceived lack of skill on the part of the less experienced person. Coaching does not normally last longer than a few months.

Shadowing lets a less experienced person, the shadower, follow very closely an experienced person, the shadowed, for a short period of time and simply observe.

Shadowing is seldom for more than a few days and may only be for a few hours. The period may be chosen when something significant may be happening or it may be a mundane period when day-to-day activities are taking place. Both periods may be valuable. The ‘shadower’ isn’t given any tasks to do nor should they pepper the ‘shadowed’ with questions. At the end of the period there should be a debriefing session. It helps to have a third person at this session with some facilitation skills. The shadowing may take place again although excessive repetition should be avoided.

The Bohm Dialogue

If a law firm or corporation has mentoring, coaching and shadowing programmes in place, these are good jumping off points to use a ‘Bohm Dialogue’. The ‘Dialogue’ is one of the most successful knowledge sharing activities yet devised, originally developed by David Bohm,⁶ one of the

most significant theoretical physicists from the 20th century. ‘Dialogue’ is derived from two roots: “dia” which means “through” and “logos” which means “the word” or more practically, “the meaning of the word”. So a ‘Dialogue’ is “through the meaning of the word.” ‘Dialogue’ requires a suspension of thoughts, impulses and judgments. Virtually all of our knowledge is produced, displayed, communicated and applied in thought. Our thoughts make the world around us. As a Buddhist would say, the world is a projection of our mind. Only by deliberately slowing down the process of thoughts and words, by carefully listening and carefully speaking, may we see the patterns and connections of our situation, our place and the fabrication of our reality. ‘Dialogue’ allows us to sense where our thoughts are taking us.

Promoting understanding and fellowship

‘Dialogue’ is not simply a conversation nor is it a debate. ‘Dialogue’ is a conversation among equals (preferably across all disciplines and relevant departments) where everyone’s ideas, opinions or theories are taken seriously but are also vulnerable to challenge and inquiry. ‘Dialogue’ is not about removing emotional blocks nor is it an attempt to teach, train or analyse. Learning may occur and blocks may be broken down as the by-product of listening and speaking. ‘Dialogue’ is not for problem-solving nor conflict resolution. As a result of increased understanding and fellowship, problems may be solved and conflicts may lessen. In the beginning, ‘Dialogue’ may be quite frustrating and continue to frustrate participants even after repeti-

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tion. Frustration may occur from the oddness of gathering without an agenda, a goal or a task. In the beginning, without these structures, busy people are likely to become alarmed or feel their time is about to be wasted. Later, frustration may occur because the conversation stalls or goes off in directions that do not seem fruitful, meaningful or worthwhile.

The ‘Dialogue’ is not attempting to find commonality but rather to provide a place for people to gather together to make something new. Creating something new frequently requires false starts, missteps and avenues of conversation that lead nowhere. At any point in the ‘Dialogue’ participants may steer the conversation in a different direction. Other participants may speak carefully and need to be listened to carefully when suggesting an alternative avenue for the conversation. With patience, repetition and attention, Dialogue does produce

something deeper, more meaningful and frequently new and unexpected understanding. This is the purpose behind the ‘Bohm Dialogue’.

Seeing ‘Dialogue’ in action

In the beginning, ‘Dialogue’ does appear to benefit from some loosely defined purpose. The initial purpose may not remain the goal as the Dialogue matures, but it does serve to kick-start the ‘Dialogue.’ In this context, Mentoring, Coaching and Shadowing are useful because they bring together levels within the hierarchy of the law firm/ organisation. A ‘Dialogue’ will enable people to speak and listen to what others have experienced and gained from the process of Mentoring, Coaching and Shadowing. It is likely that these activities will be smoother, more effective and more meaningful after ‘Dialogue’. It is possible these activities may change radically or even stop after a period of ‘Dialogue’.

How does ‘Dialogue’ work?

There must be leadership from within the law firm or organisation. The person taking the reins must have these qualities:

- Passion – they must be internally motivated to want to use ‘Dialogue’.
- Commitment – they have to ‘stay the course’ and ‘stay on track’ and spend time learning how ‘Dialogue’ will help them.
- Openness – they have to both listen to others and give their own opinion, feedback and expertise freely to all participants of the ‘Dialogue’.
- Fearlessness – they must stand-up to the nay-sayers, to the people who think it may be a waste of time.

David Gurteen, a master at structuring conversation,⁷ advises that when using ‘Dialogue’:

- Suspend assumptions and do not judge
- Observe & listen to one another
- Welcome differences & explore them
- Allow taboo subjects to be raised safely
- Listen to your inner voice
- Slow the discussion
- Search for the underlying meaning

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Guidance to setting up a 'Bohm Dialogue'

- There should be no fewer than 20 participants in a group participating in the Bohm Dialogue. Evidence suggests that less than 20 people leads to a lack of diversity in the group.
- The largest number should be 40: any larger and the circle is too big.
- It is useful to sit in a circle, on chairs, almost touching with no tables.
- Use a talking stick so only the person holding the stick is allowed to speak.
- Listen with all the concentration you have.
- Speak as slowly and carefully as you are able.
- Mobile phones and any other devices are *verboten* at all times.
- In the beginning, for the first three Dialogues, ask people to count off 1, 2, 3 and then have all the # 1's sit next to each other and so on. This mixes up the circle. Most participants will sit randomly in the circle at the fourth and following 'Dialogues.'
- Organise regular 'Dialogues' about one or two weeks apart. The 'Dialogue' should run its course and then stop. It may last for several months or even a few years.
- Membership in the 'Dialogue' is not fixed. People may come and go as they please, but it is best for people to join at the beginning of a 'Dialogue' session.
- If someone is very frustrated during a 'Dialogue' they may leave.
- Use an organiser to invite and physically arrange the logistics of the 'Dialogue'. The organiser need not attend the 'Dialogue' (but (s)he can if (s)he chooses.)
- Use an introducer to describe the 'Dialogue' process and the loose topic that will be used in the beginning. The introducer should be a part of the 'Dialogue'.
- Use a facilitator to keep the 'Dialogue' moving along very gently, answering questions on the process or the topic. Over time, the facilitator should disappear and no longer participate in the 'Dialogue' as a facilitator.
- Do not take notes or issue follow-up summaries of what happens in the 'Dialogue'.
- Let the 'Dialogue' take place each time afresh without an opening summary.

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Knowledge can be a slippery and subtle concept. Lightly structured conversation will always share knowledge most effectively. Knowledge in documents is useful but without the context from conversation, its value is difficult to understand or appreciate. To once again echo Dave Snowden, “We always know more than we can say, and we will always say more than we can write down”.

Footnote

1. Bill Proudfit is the principal of Knowledge Management Services based in Hong Kong. He has more than 25 years working experience in knowledge, records and information management. Proudfit has a Masters of Science degree in Knowledge Management from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.
2. Chris Argyis, Professor Emeritus at Harvard Business School. This is a quote lifted from Knowledge Managements in the New Economy, Rick Blunt, 2001, Lincoln, NE, iUniverse.
3. Dave Snowden is a Welsh academic, consultant and researcher in the field of Knowledge Management, taken from his Cognitive Edge Blog, Rendering Knowledge, 11 October 2008 <http://cognitive-edge.com/blog/entry/5576/rendering-knowledge/> [as seen on 11 December 2012]
4. Patrick Lambe is past president of the Information and Knowledge Management Society and Principal Consultant at knowledge management consulting firm Straits Knowledge in Singapore, taken from his video on Knowledge Audits & Knowledge Maps Part 1: Different Types of Knowledge, 28 April 2009, <http://blip.tv/plambe/knowledge-audits-knowledge-maps-part-1-different-types-of-knowledge-2055541> [as seen on 11 December 2012]
5. Dave Snowden, “Organic knowledge management, part one – The ASHEN Model: An enabler of action, Inside Knowledge”, 1st April 2000 in Volume 3 Issue 7.
6. David Bohm, Donald Factor and Peter Garrett, “Dialogue – A Proposal”, 1991, http://www.david-bohm.net/dialogue/dialogue_proposal.html. [as seen on 11 December 2012] [David Bohm, On Dialogue, 1996, New York: Routledge.]
7. Taken from a slide at a Gurteen Knowledge Cafe workshop, Hong Kong, 2010. David Gurteen publishes the Gurteen Knowledge Website, <http://www.gurteen.com/>