

# Conversation & Tacit Knowledge

James L. C. Taggart

## Preface

‘Conversation’ has become a word of choice in organizations. Over the past several years, many of those working in organizations have learned about the important role that talking to people plays in creating a learning organization. What is important to stress is *meaningful* conversational interactions among people in organizations, e.g., sharing ideas and insights, suggesting improvements to work processes, reflecting together to identify new opportunities, and taking enjoyment in pausing from hectic routines to engage co-workers and to get to know them better.

Conversation enables the continuous sharing of information and ideas, in turn contributing to the generation of new knowledge and its subsequent dispersal throughout organizations. But what I’ve come to understand better is the huge role that conversation can – in fact must – play in addressing the issue of *tacit knowledge* (the qualitative, contextual knowledge each of us carries in our heads). The context for this is steadily ageing Baby Boomers who are leaving their organizations in increasing numbers and who are taking with them vast amounts of corporate knowledge and people networks, not to mention valuable skills and competencies.

In the past, we were influenced by the literature and by those firms selling their ‘solutions.’ These solutions talked about how tacit knowledge can be captured using various methodologies and IT tools. Different perspectives have existed on this issue. People like Peter Senge (as discussed in his book *The Dance of Change*) question whether tacit knowledge can indeed be captured. Other notable people in the knowledge management field, such as Nonaka and Takeuchi (*The Knowledge Creating Company*), argue that tacit knowledge can be captured and transferred.

## A Quick Side Tour

An adapted form of Nonaka’s and Takeuchi’s knowledge management model is presented below. I would note first, however, to help set some context that two main components of knowledge transfer within an organizational setting can be identified: 1) the capturing, sharing, and dispersing of information and the creation of new knowledge by those people who work in intact and virtual teams, and 2) the capturing and transferring of critical corporate knowledge back to the organization from those who are on the cusp of leaving (e.g., retirement).

## A Complete View of Knowledge Management

	<b>Q 4</b>	<b>Q 3</b>
Explicit Knowledge	Reflecting Understanding Internalizing	Organizing Classifying Accessing
	<b>Q 1</b>	<b>Q 2</b>
Tacit Knowledge	Conversation/sharing Coaching/Mentoring Job shadowing	Capturing Documenting Codifying
	Tacit Knowledge	Explicit Knowledge

**Based on Nonaka & Takeuchi**

In *Quadrant 1* (Q 1), tacit knowledge is shared through daily, ongoing conversation; coaching and mentoring; and, where appropriate, job shadowing. This quadrant is highly qualitative and contextual in nature, and is a fundamentally important part of knowledge management. Learning occurs here, but is more at the personal and team levels. Moreover, it is still fragmented in nature; consequently, organizational learning has not emerged.

*Quadrant 2* is especially important for the organization when people have signaled their intent to leave it within a certain time period. This is where the effort is made to transform tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge using complex techniques and tools.

Until an organization has established as part of its business practices a rigorous process to systematically capture, document, and codify key information and knowledge, it will react to the imminent departures of those people possessing critical corporate knowledge. As such, a reactive approach using various knowledge transfer methodologies will be used.

In *Quadrant 3*, the huge amounts of information collected must be organized and classified enable easy access. This is akin to a portal approach, in that people in the organization are able to quickly search for and retrieve the information they need on a particular topic.

*Quadrant 4* is where further personal and team learning occurs, based on the access to critical corporate information and newly generated knowledge. Organizational learning now emerges as everyone in the organization has access to the necessary information, and where openness and collaboration have become ingrained parts of the corporate culture.

## And Onwards

Nonaka's and Takeuchi's model gives us a framework to interconnect people, processes, technology, and the organization. But it starts with people, and it is people who will determine the success of any knowledge management initiative.

Instead of approaching tacit knowledge from the angle of information technology methodological solutions, we should first focus our efforts on how we can open up our organizations by knocking down the functional and psychological walls that inhibit information sharing and collaborative learning. In effect, this means questioning the information sharing practices that are an outcome of our corporate cultures.

Conversation during our daily work – what we are learning and struggling with, how problems are solved, and how new innovative products and services are created – gets at the tacit knowledge that resides in each of our heads. Whether it is through communities of practice, action learning sets, unit meetings or virtual discussion groups, conversation is the most potent form of catalyst to see the emergence of organizational learning and knowledge creation.

Conversation is a vital part of knowledge transfer, in particular with people leaving their organizations after many years of service (e.g., retirement). This is where coaching, mentoring, and job shadowing, for example, play key roles in succession planning. Where IT and structured methodologies fit in are as support tools and processes to help maximize the capturing, codifying, sharing, and dispersing of new knowledge, and also the transfer of knowledge back to their organizations when people leave.

During most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, organizations were seen primarily as machines. They could be tweaked and controlled to deliver the desired outputs. But as the world became increasingly complex, so too did our organizations. That organizations can no longer be seen as mechanistic entities but rather as complex adaptive systems, means that we need to adjust our personal lens of how we see people interacting.

It's critical that we understand that IT solutions are not the tail wagging the dog. The role of IT needs to be clearly understood. And as part of that process, we need to come to understand that knowledge management is not a process that is detached from the human dynamics of learning. Rather, it is one that supports it. Complex adaptive systems require a much more holistic and integrated approach to learning and knowledge creation. This is especially important when one considers the impending changes facing society and organizations. Whether it is public security, technological change, an ageing population, pressures on healthcare, or securing new export markets, the solutions to these complicated issues will be addressed more effectively by actively engaging people throughout their organizations to share, collaborate and learn together.