Transpersonal Knowledge Management as an Aspect of Workforce Development

Andre S. Avramchuk[1]

Abstract

This article takes a novel perspective on gaps in transferable knowledge used in work organizations for employee and leadership development. It proposes that a transpersonal dimension or context of knowledge had not been fully considered in the common conceptions of organizational learning and knowledge creation. It explains that capturing deeper contextual underpinnings of knowledge in general, and tacit knowledge in particular, through an understanding of its transpersonal component, could lead to a more meaningful personal and professional development of employees and leaders at work. This expanded conceptualization of knowledge and its management might benefit workforce development programs and those who research the issues of knowledge transfer and workplace learning, ethics, diversity, and inclusion across the globe.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout times, scholars wondered how the human mind works or how consciousness guides decisions, including at work. Do we have the capacities to always make our choices mindfully or rationally, or do we follow predetermined schemas of genetics and destiny? Are our developmental paths primarily shaped by societal forces and culture, or are they largely manipulated by our feelings and urges? Surveying the field of human nature and development theories, it seems that almost every hypothesis has its place in a studied stream of qualified ideas (Santrock, 1997; Stevenson & Haberman, 2004; Wilber, 2000, 2001). However, many of them, especially of a Western philosophical bent, appear to lack an authoritative elucidation of human consciousness and its influences and potentials, despite prolonged attempts at studying minds biologically via brains, psychologically via behaviors, and socially via choice-makings. As a rationality-bound field of knowledge management developed, its adoption of a westernized "mind-as-machine metaphor" (Wiig, 2004, p. 63) handicapped the early exploration of broader philosophical conceptualizations of human mind, consciousness, and associated knowledge in the basis of knowledge management. Put simply, what we could not see, record, experimentally prove, or experientially replicate and exploit, did not seem to matter.

In the knowledge-based view of the firm, employee and leadership development benefit greatly from continuous and rigorous personal and organizational learning associated with knowledge acquisition and management. "People, culture, process, and technology are key components of knowledge management" (Liebowitz, 2011, p. xv), and knowledge management had been positioned to be "one of the key pillars underpinning a human capital strategy for the organization" as well as to add great value to "promoting a sense of community and belonging… and contributing toward succession planning and workforce development" (p. xiv). To deliver on this hefty goal, knowledge managed in organizations had to be comprehensive and fully contextualized for any receiver – whether human or electronic – to deeply grasp its meaning and aptly apply it in practice. Workplace realities, however, still reflect the pitfalls of limited and varied understandings of knowledge (Butler, 2000; Duguid, 2005) and how to manage it for better competitive advantage (Dalkir, 2011).

This paper reviews some possibilities for how the concept of knowledge at work can be further augmented by interdisciplinary scholarship in general and better understood in light of transpersonal dimension in particular. It looks deeper at people as a key component of knowledge management and a matter of management philosophy about knowledge, and it does not focus on technology or process components. Synthesizing and reflecting on previous research, Wiig (2004) challenged the field to see

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[1] *California State University, Los Angeles, Department of Management,*
E-mail: aavramc@calstatela.edu

and examine knowledge management from a people-based perspective involving "capabilities far beyond the realm of the mind-as-machine metaphor" and reminded us that the "human mind and its functions may be a mystery," but "actions are initiated by knowledgeable people: people make decisions and act using different kinds of mental models" (p. 63). This article, therefore, proposes to look at such "mental models" in a more expansive way that transcends a currently limited view of a person's knowledge-generating capacity at work, bringing in a selection of research on psychology of mindfulness and spirituality, cognitive-ability studies, and practical insights from leadership and employee development dynamics.

EXPLICIT AND TACIT KNOWLEDGE MANAGED IN ORGANIZATIONS
During what had been widely accepted as an inception phase of knowledge management as a discipline in the 1990s, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) insightfully elaborated that one of the two core types of knowledge involved in organizational learning and knowledge creation processes – tacit knowledge – was deeply personal, experiential, and hard to compartmentalize, codify, or otherwise tangibly identify. While knowledge management researchers have been rigorously studying and reporting on what they could extract, identify, sort, model, and manipulate through automated processes – explicit knowledge – the study of tacit knowledge has not yielded as much progress in management scholarship or as many useful outcomes for the business professions (Winter, 2016). Despite some attempts and recommendations for how to access and transfer tacit knowledge through storytelling, work demonstration, and other practice-related means (Bozarth, 2014; Harris, 2009; Hedlund et al., 2003; Wijetunge, 2012), its elusive nature has not yet fully yielded to scientific pressure, at least in business administration research, and is still up for interpretation and continuous infusion of interdisciplinary theorizing in hopes of better understanding and harnessing its value in organizations.

With a business drive and practical imperatives to operate based on impartial information, objective trends, and quantitative reasoning, the lack of proper (e.g., experiential) context for each explicit data element's originality might be detrimental or even disqualifying for practical decision making. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) ascribed mind-related knowledge components to the explicit (i.e., "knowledge of rationality") domain, assuming perhaps that all which mind generates can be objectively written down by the person and categorized or otherwise codified. They treated tacit knowledge as a subtler, body-related product (i.e., "knowledge of experience") where action, sometimes in concert with experimental learning, produces near inexplicable yet extant component of knowledge a person might vicariously transfer -- perhaps together with its explicit counterpart.

A new employee, for example, could learn from reading a company manual what steps to perform during a financial audit of client accounts, yet gain a deeper "know-how" from observing a seasoned auditor perform such steps in practice. The objectively written company manual could give this new employee a rational sequence of required audit steps previously recorded for explicit knowledge transfer, while working with a seasoned colleague could provide an experiential understanding fully realized only in the extant, practical context. The company in this example might attempt to record and transfer tacit knowledge about the audit performance through a video or a specific case-based story. However, such attempts have not proven to be as successful as personal apprenticeship and real-time collaboration. As organizational leaders also continue to side with their intuition and not rely as much on systematically gathered data for their important decisions (Liebowitz, 2019), it comes as no surprise that the most recent wave in knowledge management research has been about going back to the intuitive nature of knowledge, personalization of underlying information, and ultimately better capturing of the tacit know-how.

The focus of mainstream knowledge management at work appears to be in knowledge objectification. It seems that to have a fuller understanding of experience-based nature of knowledge objects, they have to be gathered and stored with more elaborate identifiers of experiential contexts in which they were created. The next stage of knowledge management research and field development, indeed, looks to be in the heavier contextualization of knowledge within the new streams of Artificial Intelligence, Big Data Analysis, Business Intelligence, and other exploratory efforts (Eidizadeh et al., 2017). The obstacles for

most of these, however, seem to appear when a true human form of original knowledge – in speech, writing, or behavior of the original producer – differs from the commonly understood meaning of that knowledge after it has been gathered, stored, and then retrieved by others for use in practice (e.g., Yu & Kohane, 2019). Something does, indeed, appear to have been "lost in translation" (Tenkasi & Boland, 1996), even though the explicit knowledge components might provide an answer to the "what?" question (e.g., what to do), and tacit to the "how?" (e.g., how to do it). Neither, however, normally explains the deeper dimensions of "why?" (e.g., why do it in a particular way – beyond the explicit or implicit requirements of the task, law, or company policy).

A TRANSPERSONAL DIMENSION OF KNOWLEDGE AND ITS MANAGEMENT

The notion of tacit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) opened the theoretical possibility of knowledge being influenced by practices and beliefs during the production of explicit knowledge or other transferable knowledge components. However, bound to practice, tacit knowledge had to be gained for exploration and exploitation in organizations through an extant experience, be it an observation, real-time collaboration, or task performance. The elusive nature of beliefs influencing knowledge, for example, usually remained implicit, unknowable, or otherwise obscure, even in the process of tacit knowledge acquisition and capture.

A newly employed auditor in our previous scenario would not insist on knowing, for instance, whether the seasoned auditor's idiosyncratic ways of performing an audit were influenced by their personal ethics, morals, other deeply held beliefs or customs, or subconscious or spiritual patterns or biases (Kanis, 2002) that are not readily apparent even to the original knowledge holder. In fact, in most western workplaces, it is prohibited or frowned upon to inquire about personal influences of someone's behaviors or practices. Even if asked, the knowledge holder may not be able or willing to explain what influenced their expert position or action outside of the normative responses (e.g., expected by the auditor's professional code of ethics; required by company policy). No other personal information would ordinarily be gathered about the knowledge imparted by the knower, as long as the receiver appeared to have learned how to perform the associated work-related task. Should the seasoned auditor retire, neither the company nor the newly minted auditor would fully understand why the retired employee performed the tasks the way they did. This dynamic repeated often and in perpetuity might be a contributor to company losses due to insufficient knowledge transfer, when the intangible "heart and soul" dimension of someone's performance was lost.

This dimension might be of either personal (e.g., fully produced within the ego and conscious awareness of the knower, or person, as in [Kashima, 2000]) or *transpersonal* kind – conceptually assumed here as not fully generated within the person's ego and immediate conscious awareness (e.g., as in [Strohl, 1998]). While tacit knowledge captures the bodily mastery for potential replication of task performance (including the conscious performance not easily explained in words), transpersonal knowledge offers the extra component – however symbolic or practical – addressing a deeper "why?" about the task performance. As objects and assumptions outside of one's immediate ego's awareness can be brought out via collaboration, contemplation, therapy, or other helpful extra-personal means, the contours of transpersonal knowledge might be brought to fore at work in connection with observing, collaborating with, and practicing with the knowledge holder over time (Gozdz, 2000). Transpersonal knowledge, therefore, could be captured and potentially managed with the goal of having a fuller contextual picture of knowledge beneficial for the organizations and their workforce development (e.g., apprenticeship models; leadership team formation; succession planning).

RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT AND DIRECTIONS

University of Chicago psychology and medicine scholars noted that sciences are much further along with studying and knowing hidden-from-the-eye influences on physical objects than on human potentials (Cacioppo et al., 2005). They attributed the discrepancy, in part, to "a [research] funding climate that demands time and attention be given to societal, psychological, and physiological deficits rather than capacities" (p.143). It is easier to authoritatively measure a deficit than a potential, especially when they

relate to human development, including in organizations. A deficit can be determined by comparison to a model subject or measured against a scale. A potential can only be predicted and, as any prediction, may not be as definitively measured. The material nature of mainstream scientific exploration limits a fuller support for research of what is humanly possible in favor of researching what went wrong. In this environment, human development topics concerning matters extraneous to human bodies yield low priority.

Workforce development practice, however, presents many vignettes of unusual (e.g., benevolent, not rationally predicted) examples of leader and employee actions (Gozdz, 2000) and generates questions about the "hidden" influences of spirituality and religion, social entanglements, altered states of mind, or other factors not entirely based in one person's ego. In relation to human mind and knowledge, these factors may lead us to wonder about: (a) the ways humans process phenomena acquired by currently unknown means; (b) the picture human consciousness paints from the transpersonal information it receives; and (c) the actionable conclusions our minds produce to guide our brains, behaviors, and choices in a seemingly unsubstantiated fashion. These are potential topics of further exploration not only in psychology (e.g., neuropsychology, transpersonal psychology) but also in the management philosophy and development fields that might expand the horizons of those studying ethics, sustainability, and spirituality as components of workforce development and organizational learning. Before the concept of transpersonal knowledge takes root in the knowledge management research, it might need to find its way there through the context of integral human development and learning at work, perhaps building on some approaches of leading thinkers summarized to some extent by Wilber (2000, 2001, 2005) and others (e.g., Kanis, 2002).

Body possesses a degree of *pre*-symbolic or sensory knowledge; mind works with symbolic knowledge; and spirit deals with *trans*-symbolic knowledge or gnosis. Notice that mind, being *the* symbolic mode, can form symbols of each of the three domains: the material world, the mental world itself, and the spiritual world. Those three modes of symbolic knowledge, when added to transsymbolic [sic] gnosis and presymbolic [sic] awareness, give us five general modes of cognition. (Wilber, 2005, p. 141)

These five conceptual modes, therefore, are body-to-body, mind-to-body, mind-to-mind, mind-to-spirit, and spirit-to-spirit. Symbolic phenomena, or objects of consciousness, are a mind's means of knowledge generation, identification, and transport. Appreciating the value of purely material (bodily) and purely spiritual (gnostic) ways of acquiring knowledge to the integral human development, this paper left them aside and focused on the understanding and managing of symbolic-phenomenal cognition, including an emphasis on the mind-to-spirit connection noted by a number of philosophers, scientists, corporate and political leaders, and workforce participants (e.g., Armour, 2002; Dudeck, 2004; Fracasso et al., 2010; Lawrence & Duggal, 2001). It introduced a possibility of transpersonal knowledge management and attempted to showcase its logical reaches outside of a community of psychologists (e.g., Hartelius, & Friedman, 2010).

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS: A CONCLUSION

One possible benefit of understanding the value of transpersonal knowledge and its management might be for the workforce (e.g., employee, leadership) development. Ghoshal's "Bad Management Theories Are Destroying Good Management Practices" (2005) article shocked business school academics and implored them to think harder about their responsibility for corporate and political scandals. Ghoshal wrote in the environment where positive textbook examples on Tyco and Enron were being urgently rewritten and the heads of business schools were re-examining their programs to increase emphases on ethics and social responsibility. Suddenly, a need for heavily ethical, moral, socially conscious, and at times spiritual preparation in an MBA classroom did not seem like a bad idea, as business professors were compelled to be somewhat accountable for not preventing their former students from "unconscionable" behaviors at work. Arguably, not much changed in the corporate world since then, given the increasing income inequality and societal discontent with the business elites. Times like that are ripe for new approaches to emerge in the business academia and foster more integral human development and consciousness teaching in preparing new generations of managers. Very seldom,

however, "soft" topics of philosophy, community, wisdom, or spirituality (where exploration of transpersonal phenomena might be perceived as useful for organizational learning and practice) resurface in the top management journals to radically challenge mainstream business approaches – as in case of Ghoshal.

Sometimes, organizational change and development proposals embrace a progressive philosophical topic (e.g., Paul Ricoeur's *practical wisdom* in [Durand & Calori, 2006]), but this remains a rarity. Employee and leadership development scholars still debate the benefits and drawbacks of different leadership styles, approaches, and frameworks – largely because of lack of consensus on what constitutes good leadership and how to best develop leadership skills. If there is relative consensus in recent leadership studies, it is about the relativistic, contextual nature and environment of leadership. In other words, there is no common prescription for how a good leader should be developed or what good leadership should look like. Decades of research notwithstanding, organizational stakeholders are still puzzled with which research results on leadership are best to adopt or what is a winning combination of skills and talents on a leadership team. One part of that seems to have garnered wide acceptance, however – a leader must be knowledgeable in order to make good (e.g., evidence-based) decisions (e.g., Hedlund et al. 2003). Good evidence for decision-making at work comes from a holistic understanding of knowledge and its skillful management. The process of acquiring knowledge in organizations is, in turn, largely about personal and organizational learning, including the insights from transpersonal contexts. Capturing these insights and managing that understanding might go a long way in advancing the concept of transpersonal knowledge management and filling in some mind-related pieces of the puzzle of integral human development at work.

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