The Attributes of Knowledge

For most organizations the adoption of KCS represents a major transformation.

The transformation starts with an understanding of the attributes of knowledge. We use the word knowledge in business conversations all the time. But when asked to define knowledge, most people pause. A definition is not immediately available off the top of our heads; it requires some thought.

It is helpful to put knowledge in the context of data and information. What distinguishes data from information? Data is just numbers or words, while information is organized numbers or words. The organization of data into information gives it some meaning. What distinguishes knowledge from information? Knowledge is information upon which I can act. Knowledge has action associated with it; we can do something with it.

The definition of knowledge is an ongoing debate in academic and philosophy circles that goes back as far as Plato. We find that for our purposes "information upon which I can act" is a helpful definition. KCS seeks to capture the collective experience of the organization in ways that others can use. "Use" or "act on" being the key point.

If we accept the definition proposed above we can move on to identifying some of the key attributes of knowledge. First we must recognize that information I can act on, or use, is dependent on my having some context or experience with that information. That is, I have to already know some things that complement the information to make it actionable. So information that is actionable to me might not be actionable to you. We all bring something to the knowledge party. This introduces an uncomfortable ambiguity about knowledge. What is knowledge to me might not be knowledge to you. Knowledge is not an absolute!

For example: the long-range weather forecast for an office worker in San Francisco is interesting information. That same weather forecast for a vineyard manager in Napa is actionable; the vineyard manager will make decisions and take actions to maximize the yield and quality of his harvest. What is knowledge to some is only information to others.

This means that what we have in our "knowledge base" is really only potential knowledge because the usefulness of that information depends on the context, experience and need of the person looking at it. Information becomes knowledge in the moment of use. It is no wonder people pause when asked to define knowledge; it is rather abstract.

We all have some knowledge: the ability to take action on information. It is interesting to consider a few questions about the knowledge that we have in our heads:

- How did we get the knowledge we have?
• When do we stop learning?
• How confident are we in our knowledge - are we ever one hundred percent confident in what we "know"?
• How do we gain confidence in what we know?

We gain knowledge through interaction and experience. Most of us would agree that we are never absolutely certain about our knowledge because in fact we never stop learning. We are constantly gaining new perspectives and enhancing what we know. And we gain confidence in what we know by trying it, the same way we gain it initially, through experience. We do not systematically get a subject matter expert to review our knowledge and tell us what is good and what isn’t.

When considering the attributes of knowledge we could say knowledge is:

• Gained through interaction and experience
• Constantly changing (we never stop learning)
• Never 100% complete or 100% accurate
• Validated through use, experience and interaction (not by subject matter experts)

Is this what people in our organization expect when we say we are implementing a knowledge base or a knowledge management practice? Do they expect it to be created as a result of interaction and experience, constantly changing, never complete, not absolutely accurate, and validated through use? Usually not! Unfortunately, people’s expectation of a knowledge base or a knowledge management system is perfect, pristine knowledge approved by experts. We have to change people’s expectations if we really want to capitalize on the collective experience of everyone interacting with the knowledge.

For most, the adoption of KCS represents a major shift in thinking. It requires a shift in the culture (values and focus) from:

- Individual to Team
- Activity to Value Creation
- Completion to Evolution
- Escalation to Collaboration
- Content to Context
- Knowing to Learning and Sharing