

# Leveraging Collective Wisdom to Impact Workplace Culture

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## ABSTRACT

*Wisdom, both personal and collective, is largely missing in both information science and knowledge management literature. Workplace culture and shared vision impact every level of our organization in a positive or negative direction. A healthy culture and optimistic shared vision can provide a climate for knowledge sharing and provide opportunity for rich transfer of collective wisdom in our workplace communities. Wisdom is evolved from knowledge and can be cultivated by knowledge and learning specialists. This chapter places wisdom as the desired result of successful knowledge management and provides an opportunity for scholars, students, and practitioners to leverage this rich resource in our organization and extend our models, processes, and theories.*

Keywords: wisdom, knowledge, DIKW, community, management, resiliency, adaptability, connection, culture, belongingness

## INTRODUCTION

“Wisdom is the pinnacle of human cognitive performance” (Allen, 2022, p. 114). Organizations seek competitive advantages to leverage effectiveness and productivity. Knowledge managers are responsible for the tacit and explicit knowledge sharing tools, functions, and processes needed to ensure that individuals can access and utilize institutional knowledge and resources needed to effectively complete their job duties. Current theories, models and information science, knowledge management and Human Resource Development (HRD) offer little significant insight into this area of scholarship. The broad topic of wisdom has gained some traction in business and management journals, training magazines as well as within HRD/training function of organizations seeking avenues to better understand and enhance knowledge discovery, acquisition, sharing, and implementation. Wisdom is not a philosophical exercise but a viable avenue to a competitive edge in our global knowledge economy.

This chapter presents an extension of scholarship presented in “Fostering Wisdom at Work” (Allen, 2022) and is catered for knowledge management scholars and practitioners. The purpose of the chapter is to open the field of wisdom to knowledge management scholars so that, as a field, we can further our understanding of individual and collective wisdom to impact organization culture. It should serve as a reference for students learning about wisdom and a roadmap for KM to help leaders and learners in different segments.

The chapter begins by describing the relationship of wisdom to information science and provides an overview of wisdom from a knowledge management and learning perspective. An understanding of classical individual wisdom provides a solid theoretical foundation to explore the cultivation of collective wisdom in organizations. Finally, the researchers explore collective wisdom as it applies to workplace

communities and organizations. Wisdom is highly prized yet remains a largely untapped resource in knowledge organizations.

## DIKW

To understand wisdom, within the current context of our field, we need to review how wisdom is most often presented. In the field of information science, the DIKW hierarchy is used to characterize information organization and is often expressed as a hierarchical pyramid with data at the base and wisdom at the apex. The DIKW model, attributed by Ackoff (1989), prescribes a direct, and building relationship between data, information, knowledge, and wisdom.

“Data are a collection or set of facts (numbers, measurements, observations, or descriptions) that can be quantitative or qualitative in nature” (Allen, 2022, p. 119). Data is seldom useful for decision making, but it is raw material for decision making that needs to be processed and organized in a meaningful way to become information. As knowledge managers we must capture accurate data and transform data to information.

Data can *transform* to information when it is contextualized. “Information is structured data with attached meaning, connection, and significance” (Allen, 2022, p. 118). Information is learned from data and is sufficient to make decision making. As knowledge managers we ensure that the information is each to find, use, share and learn from to facilitate organizational knowledge.

Knowledge can be *created* from information when it is internalized by a person so that it can be put into practice (Davenport, 1998). As knowledge managers we are concerned with knowledge acquisition, knowledge curation and knowledge sharing of tacit, explicit, and embedded knowledge.

Wisdom can *evolve* from knowledge when an individual uses their knowledge, experience and understanding to identify patterns, make connections, and underlying principles to make sound judgements and wise decisions. As knowledge managers, we are challenged to move beyond knowledge acquisition and knowledge transfer to foster individual and collective wisdom that not only include the knowledge and experience but an understanding self and understanding others. This cultivates a benevolent implementation of knowledge solutions that produce a beneficial course of action for the individuals, workplace community, larger organization, and society.

The hierarchical aspect of DIKW implies a “building block” relationship. First data, then information, then knowledge and finally wisdom. The hierarchy is easy to understand yet implies that we start from raw data and can build to knowledge. This knowledge is then applied to create wisdom. If this hierarchy is transferred on a continuum or possess, we might see that Data is raw and unorganized. Information is *learned* from data as it is organized to become structured and useful. Knowledge is *created* from information as it is contextualized and synthesized. However, knowledge may *evolve* to wisdom.

The hierarchical nature of the DIKW model has been called into question by researchers (e.g., Frické, 2009; Rowley, 2007) due to the conservative definitions of the four concepts. For example, the distinction between data and information is not so clear as some view information as a type of data. The relationship between wisdom and knowledge is complicated and is not simply an accumulation of data, information, and knowledge, but rather than simply connecting principles and applying knowledge to practice. The complex relationship between wisdom and knowledge *is much more than* connecting principles and applying knowledge to practice, but an integration of a complete array of human traits that work in partnership with knowledge application and experience. The next sections explore this complex relationship and discuss how collective wisdom can be cultivated in the workplace community.

## WISDOM

Wilson (1999) stated “The world henceforth will be run by synthesizers, people able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely. (p. 294)”. Development of wisdom not only benefits the individual but benefits the organization as a whole. As wisdom is fostered in the individual, and collective wisdom is cultivated in the workplace community our

organizational knowledge will flourish over time. This parallels the system that the grandparents impart their wisdom to the younger generation to enhance the survival of the species. In the same way, within our organization, we must develop strategies to not only grow wisdom but develop mechanisms for discovery, acquisition, and transfer of both knowledge and wisdom.

Wisdom can be classified as tacit, explicit, or embedded in nature in parallel to knowledge categories. Wisdom can be discovered, wisdom can be curated, wisdom can be shared. Allen states that “Collective wisdom is a shared understanding of wise behaviors that are collected and curated by an interconnected group to create a beneficial course of action for the group, communities, and society.” (2022, p. 119).

As a society, we have created many advanced measures of knowledge and intelligence and use these instruments to assess progress and create development plans to enhance knowledge acquisition and transfer. Yet, there is an enormous lack for research, modeling, and instrumentation for wisdom in business. “Growing research suggests that wisdom is a personally and socially useful construct; it has been linked to better overall physical and mental health, well-being, happiness, life satisfaction, and resilience” (Jeste & Ellen, 2019, p. 129).

The field of knowledge management, and information science in general has little published research or scholarly work around wisdom that provides theories, models, theories, processes to guide professionals in the area of wisdom or collectively wisdom. Wisdom has been investigated by the fields of management, business, or leadership. Within the last 10 years, business and management have turned to the subject of wisdom to better develop business and leadership ethics. Wisdom is a “uniquely human virtue combining compassion, intuition, knowledge, experience, and sound judgment to create a beneficial course of action for individuals, communities, and society.” (2022, p. 18). For knowledge managers, religious, philosophical, and sociological perspectives can provide some insight into the theoretical construct of individual wisdom. Learning specialists and knowledge managers must have tools to better understand, model and leverage the acquisition and sharing of wisdom in organizations.

Allen (2022) advances that individual wisdom contains three separate constructs that include: knowledge and experience, understanding self, and understanding others. These three aspects, or dimensions, of wisdom provide a comprehensive perspective of wisdom that can assist knowledge managers to better understand all aspects of this complicated human virtue. Unlike data, information, and knowledge, wisdom is set apart by its virtuous characteristics. Contextualized through experience, capable of viewing from the self- and others-lens, wisdom surpasses knowledge in its intrinsic ability to see the whole of knowledge complete with feeling, perspective, and depth.

Figure 1: Wisdom construct model (Allen, 2022)



## Knowledge and Experience

“Experience is the practice or the application of knowledge over a period of time. Knowledge is the depth and breadth of information and skills acquired through interaction, participation, observation integrated with an individual’s comprehension of connected experiences” (Allen, 2022, p. 119). There is a strong relationship between our depth and breadth of experience and the depth and breadth of knowledge. Depth of knowledge grows considerably when we spend time learning a narrow field (subject-matter expertise). The downside of specialization is a reduced breadth of knowledge and experience. Our breadth of knowledge and experience grows when we study and can connect multiple disciplines or related areas of knowledge.

The modern figure of speech, “*A Jack of all trades, master of none.*” aptly describes the subject matter expert. However, the original phrase more aptly describes the generalist when stated as the full quote, “*Jack of all trades, master of none, but oftentimes better than master of one.*” Rather than a narrow path that focuses on a narrowly defined expertise and experience, we may be better served by balancing a depth and breadth of knowledge. This balance provided individuals to not only gain knowledge in one area but gain new knowledge of multiple disciplines. It requires both learning and unlearning, abstract reasoning, and systematic thinking to apply knowledge across experiences. Both depth and breadth of knowledge and experience are critical to fostering wisdom in individuals and cultivating collective wisdom.

Personal characteristics of knowledge and experience may be observed as: abstract reasoning, competence, explicit knowledge, implicit knowledge, insight, intuition, learning, unlearning, systematic thinking, objectiveness, perception, sound judgment, systematic thinking, and unlearning.

## Understanding Self

The second construct of wisdom is understanding self. Strength of character and resilience are enhanced by overcoming adversity. Resilience is a key to understanding self. Understanding self is concerned with an ability to better understand how we respond to adversity in our lives. Adversity is an underutilized leverage to build resilience. Both individuals and organizations cycle through periods of comfort and time of adversity. However, adverse situations provide opportunities for self-growth. “Resilience speaks to our

ability to bounce back and grow despite adversity. Resilience is a key between self-reliance and sound judgment.” (Allen, 2022, p. 118).

From a personal perspective, individual resilience is strengthened from encountering and overcoming adversity (Luthar, Crossman, and Small, 2015). This is true for individuals or organizations (Herbane, 2019). Research in the areas of multiple and emotional intelligence (Garner, 1983; Goleman 1995) provides tremendous insight into both understanding self and understanding others. Understanding self is independent of other people. A person living alone or in isolation or working independently in an organization can grow their knowledge and experience and understanding self independently.

Shaolin monks are a prime example of individuals with high levels of self-understanding dedicating a portion of their life to understand how to overcome adversity in both physical martial arts and meditation. Understanding self is not building comfort, perfection, or even mastery. It is built with a personal drive for growth requiring creativity that matches the adversity facing the individual. We build understanding and resiliency through persistence, growth, learning and unlearning during challenging or adverse situations that stretch our ability to adapt to change.

As knowledge managers, adversity provides unique opportunities for understanding organizational response to the adversity and building resilience to future adversity. Personal characteristics of understanding self may be observed as: agency, belief systems, courage, drive, flexible, mindfulness, optimism, patient, perseverant, self-direction, self-growth, self-reliance

## **Understanding Others**

The third construct of wisdom is understanding others. Our workplace communities depend on understanding others. Adaptability is a key to understanding others. Goleman (1995) introduction of emotional intelligence to provide insight in our ability to assess our understanding of self (self-awareness, and self-management) and our interaction with those around us (social awareness and relationship management). The intelligence domains demonstrate that not only do we need skills to manage our ourselves, but we also need skills and competencies to connect and interact with others. We must not only create and capture knowledge, but we need to share and apply knowledge and wisdom in a knowledge global economy. As stated in emotional intelligence frameworks, empathy, influence, and inspiration (Goleman, 1995) are important characteristics for relationship management and awareness. Wisdom is a generational activity that moves knowledge from one generation to the next (Smith, 1991). Knowledge and wisdom are both unique resources that are shared yet not given away. In other words, when we share knowledge or wisdom, we do not lose it, but we spread it to others. While explicit knowledge is the easiest to document and share, tacit knowledge and much of wisdom is implicit and intuitive wisdom therefore more difficult to evolve from knowledge to wisdom. When cultivating the collective wisdom we are not only looking for leaders/coaches/mentors, but caring individuals that demonstrate a benevolence in sharing knowledge and a compassionate generosity toward their workplace community. Consider the impact on our workplace communities if knowledge managers are able to build work cultures of benevolence and compassion for wisdom to flourish.

Personal characteristics of understanding others may be observed as: accountable, Benevolence, compassionate, empathy, ethical, generosity, influential, inspiring, listener, responsible, sacrificing, sharing

## **ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND CHANGE**

Knowledge managers are key figures in organizational hierarchy, but seldom lead cultural change. There is an inherent disadvantage to leading organizational change except from the top. Organizational culture is complex and difficult to change. Zheng, Yang and McLean (2008) have shown that knowledge management plays a role in the relationship between organizational culture, structure, strategy and organizational effectiveness. They explain further that “culture has the strongest positive influence on knowledge management. This implies that knowledge management practices need to center on incorporating culture-building activities to foster an environment that is knowledge-friendly.” This is area

research that connect perception of organizational learning and knowledge management is well founded on a large body of research that emphasizes the critical importance of learning and knowledge management in organization culture (e.g., Chun, 2013; Gold, 2001; Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Watkins and Marsick, 1996 and 2003). Zheng, et al. (2008) states “Organizations that are adaptive, consistent in their values, engaging to employees, and embracing common missions in their cultures have a higher tendency to probe into issues, to seek methods to reduce costs, to look into the future, and to act proactively in their strategies” (p. 770).

Knowledge managers have a significant role in developing a learning organization and further connect activities to organizational culture and leverage knowledge and wisdom to better impact organizational effectiveness. Our learning cultures are important and are impacted by factors such as connection, continuous learning, inquiry and dialog, collective learning, embedded systems, employee empowerment (Egan, Yang, & Bartlett, 2004; Shuck, 2011), and leadership.

Organizational culture is a set of shared values, beliefs and assumptions that employees share about the organization. This culture governs the way that employees behave and interact in the workplace. This culture established norms and should bring all employees together to help understand and solve problems encountered by the organization. Weak cultures feature poor decision making, lack of transparency, high attrition rates, siloed work structures, low focus on effectiveness. On the other hand, strong cultures emphasize belongingness, widely accepted values and purpose, stability, innovation, team and outcome orientation, and support. Lack of advancement, lack of challenge, unethical behavior, ineffective leadership, and lack of development are drivers of employee turnover. Our global knowledge economy will need to emphasize courageous leadership, employee belongingness, appreciation, shared purpose, opportunity, growth, innovation, and success.

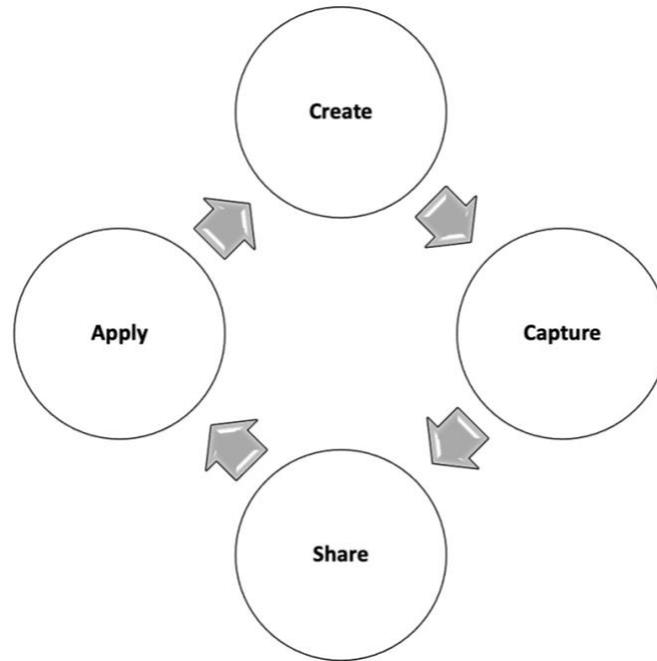
Knowledge managers and learning can best impact organizational outcome by improving the learning culture of their organization. Senge (1990) popularized the term learning organization with the goal of continuous and system learning. As a systems scientist he and others prescribed that organizations build innovation and through systems thinking. This included team learning, shared vision and personal mastery. Allen (2022) argues that “learning organizations are a foundation from which we can build wise organizations. A wise organization is a step forward, as adding ‘fostering wisdom’ is a natural next step in progression of organizational learning and growth” (p. 108). Knowledge management requires a major shift in organizational culture and a commitment from the firm to make it work (Chang & Tung-Ching, 2015).

## **Shared Models**

The knowledge management process is described by many authors across multiple fields. Managing the knowledge management process is difficult. Knowledge is not easily stored (Gopal & Ganon, 1995). Allee (1997) describes properties of knowledge: messy, self-organizing, seeks community, travels via language, slippery, likes looseness, changes and experiments, perishable; self-organizing, evolves organically, multimodal, and multi-dimensional.

Given the instability of knowledge properties, knowledge workers are challenged to develop a model to help them process wisdom in their organization. Knowledge managers can utilize many existing knowledge management tools with minimal modification. For example, the knowledge management process can be modified or reimagined to accommodate wisdom:

*Figure 2: Knowledge management process*



Just as knowledge is created from information, wisdom *evolves* from knowledge. When an individual uses their knowledge, experience and understanding to identify patterns, make connections, and recognize underlying principles, they make sound judgements and wise decisions. Learning Science has few avenues to teach individual wisdom. Rather, wisdom is fostered in individuals and collective wisdom is cultivated through shared growth.

Our models, tools and processes of knowledge management can be utilized to accommodate wisdom with few modifications, however wisdom is much rarer than knowledge. Allen (2022) offers “behavioral characteristics and traits that are woven in virtually every discussion on the topic of identifying the wise:

<u>Knowledge &amp; Experience</u>	<u>Understanding Self</u>	<u>Understanding Others</u>
Abstract reasoning	Agency	Accountable
Competent	Belief system	Benevolent
Explicit knowledge	Courageous	Compassionate
Implicit knowledge	Driven	Empathetic
Insightful	Flexible	Ethical
Intuitive	Mindful	Generous
Learner	Optimistic	Influential
Objective	Patient	Inspiring
Perceptive	Perseverant	Listener
Sound judgment	Self-directed	Responsible
Systematic thinking	Self-growth	Sacrificing
Unlearning	Self-reliant	Sharing

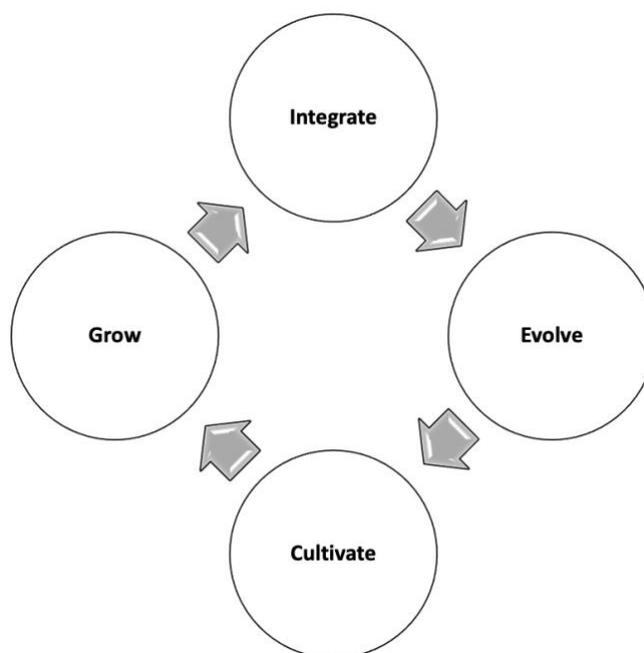
While not every wise person has all these virtues and characteristics, they are often used to describe both the locally and globally wise” (p. 8). Individual wisdom is a topic that has been discussed for centuries, yet, we have little understanding of how to individually become “wise.” For the purpose of the discussion,

individual wisdom is largely used to provide an understanding of collective wisdom in the context of an organization.

Imagine an organization of wise individuals versus an organization of knowledgeable individuals. Both types of organizations sound ideal, but an organization of knowledgeable individuals is attainable given the tested knowledge models and applicability of innovative knowledge tools and techniques. The learning organization that produces knowledgeable individuals is well within reach today. An organization of wise individuals is not attainable given the lack of current research and models to aid knowledge workers in building an organization with collective wisdom.

The conceptualization of an organization guided by collective wisdom does not exist today. Knowledge managers will require new approaches to understanding how to evolve knowledge to wisdom in organizations.

Figure 3: Wisdom cultivation process



This wisdom management model provides a conceptual re-framing of the knowledge management process to better address the process of developing collective wisdom in our organizations.

*Integrate:* We integrate new knowledge into existing knowledge and experience. This integration involves assessment of current environment and conceptualization of future use. The assessment and conceptualization require human interaction as different perspectives are integrated into new wisdom. This may involve learning new and unlearning old perspectives, integrating new ideas and processes, or conceptualizing and innovating. Integration requires a great deal of change and adaptation, an integral piece for wisdom.

*Evolve:* Wisdom evolves from integrated knowledge. Evolution involves dramatically changing the original into something new with inherent characteristics from which it was born. While evolution can take time and happen over generations, knowledge managers who understand how wisdom is born can duplicate this process in knowledge systems by understanding how wisdom evolves. Wisdom is uniquely human and involves characteristics such as insight, intuition, judgement, connection, learning and unlearning. Wisdom requires an evolution from information by integrating knowledge and experience, understanding self, and understanding others to create a deeper level of cognizance.

*Cultivate:* Integrated knowledge can evolve into individual wisdom, but cultivation allows for individual wisdom to become collective wisdom. Unlike knowledge, wisdom may be best

understood as fostering individual wisdom to cultivate collective wisdom. Collective wisdom is cultivated in a trusting community of individuals that offer mutual support and inspiration. Cultivation is dependent on empathizing with the individual – listening to and sharing with – in way that builds *Understanding Others* to promote collective wisdom.

*Grow*: Growth is a key outcome of wisdom. As collective wisdom is cultivated in an organization, the wisdom-cultivating community grows; as the wisdom-cultivating community grows, wisdom grows. We trust our mentors who generously offer wise input. Wise decisions lead to a beneficial and shared course of action. Growth can be attributed to the size and wisdom flourishing in the community as individuals learn to flex and adapt with the gained perspective of collective experiences. As with any cyclical model, growth and increasing numbers of individuals into the community leads to further integration and the cycle continues.

As the pinnacle of human performance, wisdom is often considered unattainable and meant only for a chosen few. However, wisdom is both obtainable for both individuals and groups. It's unfair to an individual's wisdom as against the remarkably wise (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela). Wisdom should be assessed within the context of an individual's community. In the same way the collective wisdom can be assessed within the context of community need. Wisdom moves us beyond knowledge and experience to understanding ourselves and others. It moves us into the implicit and away from the tacit. Wisdom is more difficult to understand and cultivate but consider how an organization might change by focusing on evolving toward wisdom rather than knowledge acquisition, sharing and application.

## **WORKPLACE COMMUNITY**

Organization culture and people intersect in the workplace community. Simply, it's where the rubber meets the road. Not unlike a living organism, collective wisdom or a community does not flourish without a healthy culture. A strong and healthy organizational culture should emphasize belongingness, widely accepted optimistic values and purpose, stability, innovation, outcome orientation, and support. These positive cultural characteristics provide the foundation for building a strong and healthy workplace community.

A workplace community consists of a group of engaged colleagues that offer mutual support and that influence and inspire work within the larger organization. Each day we, as individuals, enter our organization as a member of a team, department, division or organization. Depending on the size of the organization, individuals typically define their workplace community as a segment of colleagues rather than a larger organization. For most individuals, their workplace community is the boundary of their overall organization interaction. The workplace is where we develop relationships, gain mentors, identify our belonging and perform critical activities that support organizational success. We value the community where we belong and receive both support and security as a member of the community.

Staudinger (2010) pointing out that “a complex pattern of personal characteristics and experiential features have to coalesce in order for wisdom to emerge” (p. 641). Allen, Bracey, Gavrilova and Zimmerman (2020) further this point stating that wisdom characteristics “can be observed in individuals from every race, creed, color, and society and have no requirements, of age, educational background, or job/social title. When linked and enhanced, these characteristics can foster not only a knowledgeable workforce, but a workforce that leverages wisdom to provide deep understanding of data, information, and knowledge, ultimately providing wise advice within organizations. While a “wise” person is a unique golden nugget found in an organization, aspects and characteristics of wisdom can be bolstered to enhance a corporate workforce in this dynamic and changing knowledge economy” (p. 159).

Knowledge managers need to decide of where they can best impact growth and development. While knowledge managers seldom define and implement organization vision, culture, and strategic direction, they are often involved with supporting implementation at all levels of the organization. Knowledge manager establishes and maintains a healthy learning environment in the organization that facilitates growth and organizational success.

The development of individual wisdom and collective wisdom are happening in parallel for both the individual and the workplace community. The healthy workplace community provides an opportunity for fulfilled individuals to evolve and grow adaptability, to build resilience, and connect with others in their community. As social learners we interact and grow with others by cooperatively investigating and solving complex problems that test knowledge, skills and abilities.

Cooperative mentoring is a natural outgrowth of social learning and growth. Individual's value cooperative relationships, leverage knowledge and experience of others in the mission of building capacity. Cooperative social growth provides collective success of the workplace community. Within a community of practice demonstrate wise decision making, while sharing knowledge and growing collective wisdom to create a better future for the community for ourselves and our colleagues.

## **WORKPLACE CULTURE**

There's not a commonly accepted term for wisdom that is akin to management of knowledge. Terms such as cultivating and fostering move us away from an authoritative structure of "management" to the idea of a caretaker of wisdom. In the same way, bankers manage their money as farmers care for their crop. Living organisms, whether plants, animals, or humans thrive in fertile climates that provide the necessities for growth. Some environments provide a safety and comfort (kind environments) others require a hardiness (wicked environments) that requires greater resiliency.

Theodore Roosevelt is misattributed as stating "*Do what you can, with what you have, from where you are.*" The statement rings true for the question, "How do we make an impact?" Knowledge managers work in many different parts of the organization and interact with employees and systems throughout the organization. Healthy workplace culture is the basis for advanced cognitive development, employee satisfaction and retention (Brunges & Foley-Brinza, 2014). As knowledge manager, our focus on employee training, education and development has a direct impact on the learning culture of the organization and therefore overall workplace culture.

Lack of advancement opportunities, lack of career growth and advancement, lack of challenge, lack of engagement (Shuck, 2011), mismanagement and poor leadership, lack of transparency, lack of voice, stress and negativity each deteriorate individual wellbeing and overall organizational climate and culture (REF). Knowledge manager can indirectly impact many of these factors through knowledge sharing, collaboration, systems management, and both individual and collective development of employees that build belonging, challenge, and growth.

Allen 2022 describes twelve qualities of culture that serve to optimize our wise organizations and workplace communities:

*Ethics* are vital to an organization. A trusting culture based on sound ethics is the first step to building shared purpose, engaging employees, and providing a professional climate that invites ideas, and connected reliance.

*Shared Purpose* is a promise/agreement with our collaborative partners. It provides the "why?" of our work. As social creatures it provides us a catalysis for engagement, beyond self, to support and be supported by the community to achieve a common purpose.

*Leadership* (formal and informal). The best of our leaders influence, inspire and support their followers. Our leaders are the champions. Leaders are not only champions of organizational purpose, but equally champions and advocate the ideas and concerns of their followers.

*Support* is needed for individuals to take risks and provide honest feedback. If trust, ethics, and psychological safety are in question at any level of the organization, individuals cannot feel safe to fully engage and contribute toward a shared purpose. Leadership must take the lead in creating a safe environment where everyone feels comfortable contributing, learning and developing.

*Connection* is a key to building relationships between ourselves and others. Individuals must connect both to their colleagues and organizational purpose. We cannot access empathy, compassion, empathy, and generosity without a connection to our community and larger organization.

*Belongingness* is a human need to give and receive support and security as an engaged member of a group. With belonging comes mentoring, development, sacrifice, learning, growth. I cannot hope to engage individuals that don't feel that they belong - even if they are included.

*Positive Disruption* is good for the organization. Positive disruptors see opportunities for improvement and move away from group think. Collective wisdom is derived from the collective wise behaviors that we have in our organizations. Our positive disruptors look for new ways of doing ordinary things in a more efficient and effective way. We need adaptability, open-mindedness, innovativeness, and ways to leverage our capabilities and capacities. Wisdom comes from our growth, adaptability, connection, and resilience, not from stagnation and contentment.

*Incubator of Innovation* is a culture that supports innovative programs at the risk of failure. This innovation can lead to new resources, technologies, markets and customers. We take risks and get honest feedback from the failures. Innovation at risk to failure can only exist in a safe and engaged culture.

*Resilience* is our capacity to adapt and recover from difficult situations, adversity or challenge. If we take risks we will eventually fail and must learn to bounce back and grow despite adversity. Good judgement comes from overcoming bad experiences and judgements. Resistance to change and failure provide the opportunity for agile change and rapid innovation.

*Learning and Unlearning* are windows to new knowledge and wisdom. Our models of the world are temporary and we must become adaptive to change. While we are taught that learning is positive, unlearning is weighing, judging, comparing, discerning and deciding if a new model or paradigm should replace outdated ones in order to adapt to new circumstances. As we grow in complex social environments, we learn from rich diverse experiences that challenge our assumptions and we must be willing to disengage from old models, evolve and grow.

*Systematic thinking* allows us to see the processes and diverse communities that span across the hierarchy of the organization to overcome natural barriers to mentorship, learning, efficiency and effectiveness. It's very easy to see our independent system in the organization and miss how it is interconnected to other systems in the same organization toward the shared purpose.

*Optimism* is an attitude that positivity will result from an attitude or an action. Optimism provides more agency because you are responsible for the positive attitude even in face of challenge and adversity. (p. 111 - 113)

## **PERSONAL WISDOM**

The purpose of the chapter is not to discuss how to foster individual wisdom, but to shed light on the concept and tools of cultivating collective wisdom in the workplace. Personal and collective wisdom are related, but personal wisdom is independent of others, independent of the workplace, independent of family, independent of location. It's a personal quest that few seek, but is attainable by anyone with the drive to delve deep and develop a wide range of characteristics that are uniquely human in composite. As knowledge management professionals, we can serve as compassionate mentors that listen and engage.

We know from many centuries of studying wisdom that wise individuals are relatively rare. For every 100 or 200 people that we consider knowledgeable we will only count one to three of those individuals as wise. We, as a society, value the wise beyond all others.

Wisdom is contextual and is not dependent on background, religion, socioeconomics, race or age. Wisdom people exist everywhere on earth, and they are considered wise within the context of their group, community or society. Everyone has an opportunity to become wise regardless of other circumstances of life. Wisdom and wise people exist in the jungle villages of the Amazon, rural rice farms China, the Suburb of the United States, and in the high-rise of Dubai. Yet, the idea of becoming individually wise remains mysterious and largely unstudied from a learning perspective. We develop a healthy culture that fosters individual wisdom while evolving, integrating, cultivating and growing collective wisdom in our workplace communities and organization. For knowledge management professionals, it should be noted that growing wisdom is more akin to development than either education or training education.

In order to generate wisdom, we must also create an environment of growth (learning and unlearning) that provides challenges. This challenge includes not only an expanding of the breadth and depth of cognitive knowledge, but by expanding individual understanding of self and others. While the individual is responsible for growth, knowledge managers can cultivate a culture of learning and development that enhance career and personal development.

## CULTIVATING COLLECTIVE WISDOM

Wisdom evolves through complicated interaction of many different characteristics and virtues that can be clustered in three constructs of knowledge & experience, understanding self, and understanding others. Wisdom can evolve from knowledge when an individual, or group of individuals, use their knowledge, experience and understanding to identify patterns, connections, and underlying principles to make sound judgements and wise decisions. Collective wisdom is developed and refined with an integrated collection of wise behaviors that are cultivated and grown by an interconnected group for the purpose of identifying a beneficial course of action for the group, communities, and society. Collective wisdom is a community activity.

Figure Four: Five values of collective wisdom



### Community

A community is a connected group of individuals with shared interest, values, and purpose. There is not a limit on the size of a community. A small group, team, family, tribe, department, division or a small organization can operate as a community. “Community” can wildly vary depending on organizational

structure, but for the purpose of wisdom they are best when they are diverse and contain a rich depth and breadth of knowledge, experience, and backgrounds.

Three decades of research in Communities of Practice (CoP) provides a rich resource for understanding of how individuals work together with shared purpose. Cox (2010) provides a very good review of the four seminal works to define CoP as “a relatively informal, intra-organizational group specifically facilitated by management to increase learning or creativity” (p. 538). CoP literature is a good beginning for Knowledge Managers working to leverage learning in their organization.

Workplace communities must provide connection, support, and belonging. As social learners, we grow by interacting with others and working cooperatively to investigate and solve problems. Connection is a first step in building community. This connection can be a shared purpose, but more importantly to come to a shared understanding of others in the community to begin a deeper social connection. A workplace community supports others in the community beyond simply a connection between co-worker guided by productivity goals. To leverage collective wisdom, trust and support work together to begin to move from representation in the community to inclusion in the community where an individual’s ideas and perspective are shared and valued by the community.

Belongingness must be a community goal when moving toward collective wisdom. Humans have an inherent need to be included as a member of a community but belong to the community. Belonging implies that the individual is fully accepted into the community where their ideas, knowledge, experience, understandings, beliefs, and values are integrated into the collective values of the community. Belonging is a critical goal if we are to build a community of mentors that are dedicated to cultivating collective wisdom for the betterment of the community

## **Shared Vision**

An optimistic shared vision is critical to a healthy culture. Shared vision builds a collective goal by providing a strategic picture of the future. This shared commitment to a community vision guides principles and practices. Where group think creates an environment that blocks knowledge and wisdom growth, shared vision is related to a value system. Shared vision is more closely related to collective outcome that a community shares and often requires individuals with many different talents, backgrounds, and experiences contributing to the benefit of the whole; whereas group think does not allow for differences to be celebrated or demonstrated.

Both the organization and community vision must be shared, discussed, and modified as the organization grows and changes over time. To build collective wisdom, members of the workplace community should have a shared vision or purpose to which everyone contributes. Shared purpose establishes collective goals for everyone in the community or organization. Even with diverse activities a shared vision provides a common sense of purpose and that can be supported by every member of the community.

## **Health**

A healthy organization or organizational culture is transparent, adaptable, resilient and innovative. In a global knowledge economy, the health of the individuals and the organization are interconnected so that the health of the organization is critical to moral, communication, relationship and retention.

Organizational transparency does not mean that everyone in the organization has access to all information in the organization, but that everyone in the organization perceives that they belong in the organization to the extent that their voice is heard, questions can be answered. “Transparency is the perceived quality of intentionally shared information from a sender” (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2014, p. 1788). Without this transparency, organizational vision suffers because it is no longer shared intentionally. Since there is not a sense of ownership or connection to the vision and purpose in the community, the organization will not experience collective wisdom.

Adaptability to obstacles and facing adversity provide teaching moments in which knowledge can foster wisdom. Organizations and communities must be able to rapidly adapt to change and become resilient to adversity. “Healthy and fulfilled individuals adapt, grow resilience, and thrive in adverse and challenging

environments.” (Allen et al., 2020). As our workplace communities become resilient to adversity they learn self-reliance, resilience, and how to best communicate to build relationships. These tenets foster the integration of new knowledge and experience to evolve our collective wisdom for future conditions of adversity. An agile and healthy organization should be resilient, innovative and adaptable to fast-changing chaotic global markets.

## **Learning and Unlearning**

Senge (1990) presents that a learning organization is one that continually learns and improves. Humans are social learners that seek knowledge and crave learning. Learning is essential for our existence. In the same way that food nourishes the body, information, knowledge, and connection nourish our mind through the active process of learning. Learning is critical in aiding us to acquire critical skills and interacting with others. Learning is a lifelong process that requires curiosity, observation, reflection, integration, and application to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and abilities for future success. Learning must be a part of every individual's personal and professional activities to flourish in a rapidly changing global economy. Workers must employ learning skills to be effective in today's landscape; learning skills include creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, communication, and collaboration (Battelle for Kids, 2019).

The Greek philosopher Antisthenes states, in 400 BC, that the most useful piece of learning for the uses of life is to unlearn what is not true. A diverse and global workforce requires adapting existing models or constructing new ones to explain phenomena. It is essential to unlearn previously held beliefs and devise solutions and rapidly adapt to change.

The amount of learning, and therefore unlearning, is exponentially larger in our modern and global knowledge economy and it's expected to continue to grow.

## **Growth and Evolution**

The greatest threat to personal and collective wisdom is comfort and stagnation. Wisdom, creativity, compassion, intuition, perception, drive, courage, insight, and optimism are all attributes of humans that are difficult to replicate in artificial intelligence. Humans have a desire to learn and grow socially with other humans so that they can evolve ideas, knowledge, and experience to improve their environment.

Growth happens in many ways and growth is not always linear, continuous, or steady. Collective wisdom changes as the knowledge, experience, people, and the environment change. In adverse situations, productivity may slow but growth will continue due to an increase in the depth and breadth of knowledge and experience. Growth may not remain positive. Healthy, active, engaging, and challenging environments cultivate positive growth. Knowledge managers must tend not only to discovery, acquisition, sharing and application of knowledge. They must also develop strategies that activate challenge, engagement, and connection with others to grow the collective strength of workplace communities.

Evolution is a gradual change over time for a better chance of surviving environmental threats. From a biological viewpoint the character changes happen incrementally over many generations in the evolution of a species. While this may be a relatively fast process in single cell organisms, these incremental changes happen very slowly for more advanced primates. The process of transforming knowledge into wisdom is both incremental and complicated. Collective wisdom provides the opportunity to formalize sharing of knowledge, perspective, insight, and sound judgement through mentorship and community collaboration.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

The collective wisdom of our knowledge workforce is tremendous. Knowledge managers are positioned to act as agents of change in their organization. The ability of knowledge workers to adapt to the global learning economy depends upon the recognition that the next phase of growth lies in collective wisdom. To produce organizational wisdom, knowledge managers must recognize their role in promoting

transparent, healthy cultures within organizations, and promoting models within knowledge management systems that foster the growth of wisdom in individuals.

We have the tools, processes, and theories to manage knowledge organization, however there is a wealth of untapped wisdom that has yet to be leveraged to improve our organizations' culture and productivity. As a field, we should begin to revise, adapt, reimagine, or even unlearn what we understand about managing knowledge to better cultivate wisdom in our organizations. The inability to cultivate wisdom from knowledge managers will not only hinder their organization's growth and development but will stunt it. Understanding the importance of integrating this change is not only necessary for the health of the organization, but it is integral for the success of the workers and the organization as a whole.

Wisdom is a growth and next step in the evolution of the knowledge economy. In order to establish organizational wisdom, both knowledge workers and organizations as a whole must choose to grow and evolve.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Belongingness** is a human need to give and receive support and security as an engaged member of a group.

**Collective wisdom** is a shared understanding of wise behaviors that are collected and curated by an interconnected group to create a beneficial course of action for the group, communities, and society.

**Community** is a connected group of individuals with shared interest, values, and purpose.

**Connection** is a key to building relationships between ourselves and others. Individuals must connect both to their colleagues and organizational purpose.

**Data** are a collection or set of facts (numbers, measurements, observations, or descriptions) that can be quantitative or qualitative in nature

**Experience** is the practice or the application of knowledge over a period of time.

**Information** is structured data with attached meaning, connection, and significance

**Knowledge** is the depth and breadth of information and skills acquired through interaction, participation, observation integrated with an individual's comprehension of connected experiences

**Organizational** culture is a set of shared values, beliefs and assumptions that employees share about the organization.

**Optimism** is an attitude that positivity will result from an attitude or an action.

**Resilience** is our capacity to adapt and recover from difficult situations, adversity or challenge.