Preface

How to manage knowledge effectively is a question that has run through the literature of the field of organizational behavior for many years. Knowledge has been examined from many angles: how it is created (creativity, scanning the environment), how it is shared (network analysis, communication patterns), and how it is applied (decision making, problem solving). What Tojo Thatchenkery has finally done in *Appreciative Sharing of Knowledge: Leveraging Knowledge Management for Strategic Change* is to help us understand a simple process for getting at what it takes to actually *improve* these processes in an organization. Although the "Appreciative Sharing of Knowledge" or "ASK" approach described here is focused primarily on the act of sharing knowledge, the methodology described in this simple but important book can be applied to a wide range of knowledge management challenges and opportunities.

Many organizations have recognized the need to improve knowledge sharing processes. People at Unilever, the consumer products giant, are fond of saying "If only Unilever knew what Unilever knew." In every large, complex organization, the amount of knowledge that is actually shared and applied to organizational opportunities is a tiny fraction of the total knowledge that exists among members of the firm. Of course, information technology and accessible databases have done a great deal to provide people with access to facts, documents and other types of routine, transactional knowledge. We might refer to this kind of knowledge as "know what." While "know what" knowledge is important, there is another kind of knowledge that is perhaps even more critical to organizations. We might call this kind of knowledge "know how."

"Know how" tends to be more emergent and more tacit. It is best shared not through databases, but via interactions among people that involve explanations, examples, or demonstrations. Until now, leaders have been without an effective process for doing anything practical or powerful about improving the amount of "know how" that is transferred among members of their enterprise.

The ASK method described by Thatchenkery provides a simple method for discovering and strengthening processes that *already exist* in an organization for sharing "know how." Because it is based on an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach, the ASK method doesn't involve the installation of complex IT systems or forcing people to exhibit new behaviors requiring training or special incentives. Instead, the ASK approach uncovers things that people in an organization already do to share knowledge with one another and then seeks to involve them in experimenting with ways to strengthen those naturally occurring processes.

Thatchenkery illustrates the application of the ASK method through a case study of a bank that is concerned with the amount of knowledge it is losing each day as people retire or leave the organization for various reasons. Leaders of the bank recognized that in order to compete, they couldn't let the knowledge its employees had accumulated leave the organization with them. They needed to find more effective ways to help people share knowledge while they were still employed. Thatchenkery explains that people in the bank were acquainted with techniques used for "retrospective" learning, like the Army's After Action Review process, in which events are dissected to determine the causes of problems, but that they found these methods unpopular with employees because they seemed more focused on placing blame than on learning. The bank preferred an approach that would allow people to share what Thatchenkery calls "prospective" knowledge, which

is knowledge that they may need to be successful in the future. To do this, the leaders of the bank discovered that they needed to step aside and allow people to discover for themselves what worked, rather than mandating a knowledge sharing policy or procedure.

Readers looking for shortcuts need to understand that what is important is going through the process of discovering the unique practices that already exist and that are supported by the culture of each organization rather than installing an "off the shelf" knowledge sharing practice. Part of what makes the ASK methodology powerful is that people give the challenge of sharing knowledge more thought and in the process of doing so, become more committed to doing things that make it possible.

Sharing knowledge is a perfect target for the application of AI methods because sharing knowledge with others is a positive act. While there are those who are reluctant to share knowledge with others because they associate knowledge with power, the majority of people in organizations would readily share what they know with others if they could. In fact, most are hungry to do so. Hence, there is positive motivation to engage in a process like ASK that provides an opportunity for people to be recognized by others for what they can contribute.

Through the case, Thatchenkery demonstrates the steps that should be taken to apply the ASK methodology. While the chapters are short, easy reading, they still convey the importance of investing time and energy in executing the ASK approach. Like most other methods of changing organizational behavior, what you get back from ASK depends on what you put into it. The approach isn't hard to understand, and Thatchenkery makes it even easier to follow by ending each chapter in a Focus Box with notes for practitioners that reemphasize the critical points made. While some new language is introduced here (I personally love the idea of calling

internal consultants in this process "knowledge ambassadors") the reader won't be put off by too much academic theory. Thatchenkery gives enough background to acknowledge the sources of some underlying premises but doesn't make it a chore for readers to grasp the essence of the ASK approach. Those interested in understanding more deeply concepts involving the social construction of knowledge or the building of social capital in organizations are referred to the appropriate authors.

I expect a lot from this Focus Book. The need it addresses is clear and for a change, so is the answer.

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