

For True Knowledge Sharing, **Get Out of Your Shell**

Promoting inclusion of many perspectives and experiences into informal learning networks can result in new ideas and process solutions. *By Randy Emelo*

Does too much diversity get in the way of team effectiveness?

In a 2010 Academy of Management Journal article titled “Task Contingencies in the Curvilinear Relationships Between Intergroup Networks and Initiative Performance,” researchers Christoph Lechner, Karolin Frankenberger and Steven W. Floyd evaluated how a diverse network of collaborators impacted teams either working to refine an existing organizational process or creating unique solutions to a workplace problem. They looked at two factors among colleagues working together: the number of people involved and the diversity of viewpoints and personal values.

The researchers expected that too much diversity would limit effectiveness, particularly those tasked with refining an existing organizational process. What they found, however, was that the more diverse the networks were in terms of values and viewpoints, the more they increased their performance.

Organizations looking to foster and encourage major creative solutions and thinking among workers, as well as innovative improvements in process throughout the business, would do well to encourage diversity in their learning networks. This type of inclusive knowledge sharing thrives at companies such as McDonald’s and Sodexo that actively support

learning connections across generational, geographical and organizational boundaries.

Reach Out, Not In

The richness of diverse views and understandings often grows when people reach outside of their typical like-minded networks, rather than reaching deeper into the crowd of people with whom they have much in common. Different perspectives within knowledge-sharing communities help novel ideas and approaches rise in answer to organizational problems or issues.

Individuals in a different functional or geographical area or even from a different department or age group likely will view situations and issues through a distinct lens. Their experiences and focus areas give them a unique perspective, and this fresh take on the situation can produce innovative solutions.

“In a world that is becoming increasingly complex and interdependent, inclusive knowledge sharing is critical to fostering the dissemination of best practices at the individual, group and enterprise level, which ultimately furthers organizational goals and maximizes the full potential of our workforce talent,” said Texanna Reeves, vice president of corporate diversity at Sodexo.

Sodexo promotes inclusive knowledge sharing through a variety of channels, such as employee network groups and formal and informal mentoring. With 391,000 employees operating in 80 countries, there are many opportunities for colleagues to expand their



On the Web

For more on how inclusion promotes open communication, read “Defining Inclusion Has Bottom-Line Impact” at diversity-executive.com/articles/view/1407.

Three Ways to Share Knowledge

Diversity executives can take the following actions to bring diverse and inclusive knowledge sharing networks to life.

- 1. Cooperate and establish alliances** with learning and training peers in HR and look to influence them to move learning and training outside of job functions, making it more cross-functional and cross-organizational.
- 2. Support and advocate cross-functional peer connections** through virtual knowledge sharing technology. One way to do this is to utilize modern mentoring technology to connect people across functions and locations in support of personal and professional development, helping them connect with and learn from peers across the enterprise.
- 3. Encourage people to get outside of their own typical work networks** when looking for new insights and ideas. Diversity executives can help this happen by hosting organizationally sponsored events in person or online where people from employee resource groups can branch out and link up with people outside their common sphere.

— Randy Emelo

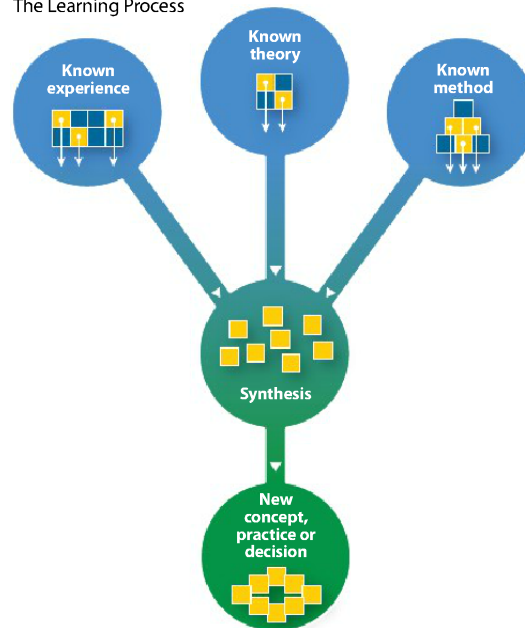
learning networks and connect with individuals different from themselves. “Mentoring has proven to be a catalyst to accelerate knowledge sharing and cultural alignment by providing direct opportunities to tap into knowledge capital,” Reeves said. “Mentoring also strengthens relationships between different employee populations and organizational leadership by enabling continuous dialogue.”

This is a critical business priority to a global enterprise such as Sodexo because, “The cultural backgrounds, unique experiences and skill sets of our employees are a direct reflection of the customers we serve and help us to provide our clients with innovative and effective solutions,” Reeves said.

The same can be said for McDonald’s. “In order for us to remain competitive and a customer favorite, we must make sure that we are including diverse thinking, backgrounds and perspectives throughout our business,” said Pat Harris, vice president and global chief diversity officer for McDonald’s Corp. “We have created a culture where diversity and inclusion is everybody’s business. This means that as the global chief diversity officer, I am not the sole person thinking about diversity, but instead everyone — from the crew room to the boardroom — should be a diversity advocate.”

Harris said mentoring plays a critical role in building and sustaining this view and culture. “We need our leaders to

Figure 1:
The Learning Process



Source: Triple Creek, 2011

mentor the next generation by modeling behaviors and explaining why diversity, in all its forms, is important to them as a leader, as a person and as an employee.”

Dispelling Myths

An ongoing challenge for diversity and inclusion leaders centers around dispelling myths about effective knowledge sharing networks. Inaccurate assumptions about what workers desire and expect from a learning and collaboration network can stymie innovations and adversely affect organizations. This is also true of assumptions regarding the best way to form networks or why people participate. Ending these preconceived notions must begin today to feel the greatest impact from enterprise-wide knowledge sharing

Myth: People only want to connect with like-minded individuals, such as those in their same job function or discipline.

Fact: Today’s knowledge workers see the value of expanding their learning networks beyond just those people in their department or location, and they embrace building a diverse cadre of collaborators from across the organization. This helps them gain broader insights from people who may have a unique perspective or practice on a similar organizational problem or issue. In mentoring software company Triple Creek’s 2010 Group Mentoring Research study, Web-based

mentoring participants were asked to describe how they contributed to the success of their organization via their mentoring activities. Given a choice of 11 responses, the top selection was “Understanding/helping another person understand a different point of view,” which was chosen by 53 percent of the respondents.

People realize when they connect with peers in other departments, divisions, functional areas and locations, they can access the collective knowledge from those who may have experienced similar situations, but who have different approaches to tackle these problems. One caveat is they have to connect for a learning purpose where they synthesize contributors’ experiences, theories or methods into a new concept, practice or decision (Figure 1). Social networking, as currently practiced, does not connect people in intentional learning engagements where progress can be tracked and results measured by the individual and the organization. Learning networks must be focused, rather than providing a way for people to accumulate 100 like-minded “friends.”

The richness of diverse views and understandings often grows more abundant **when people reach outside** of their typical like-minded networks.

Diversity and inclusion leaders would be wise to support the growth of inclusive knowledge sharing communities because of the positive organizational impact they can have. “Our diverse and highly skilled talent represents our strongest competitive advantage and our greatest sustainable resource,” said Sodexo’s Reeves. “In fact, effectively sharing knowledge positively impacts customer satisfaction, employee engagement and productivity.

“Diversity and inclusion is a business imperative and a driving force to achieving outstanding business results because it fuels Sodexo’s ability to identify and develop the best talent, create an inclusive culture where our workforce can thrive and deliver comprehensive solutions to our clients and customers.”

Myth: The greatest knowledge sharing value comes from connecting with those higher up in the organization.

Fact: While traditional mentoring typically focuses on a lower-level employee seeking guidance and wisdom from someone higher up, the focus for knowledge sharing today has broadened. People use inclusive knowledge sharing networks to build credibility based on competence, not for political posturing. They see the value of searching for collaborators at all levels of the organization, and seek out people who could use their expertise or who have the information they need, regardless of job title or organizational authority. In the Group Mentoring Research study, 72 percent of group mentoring participants cited their peers and fellow group learners as good or excellent sources of learning.

Valuable learning can occur by connecting with people at a variety of job levels. This can happen organically via use of modern mentoring technology, which allows people to formalize informal learning and address emerging learning needs as they happen. Subordinates can help people understand how their decisions affect those below them in the organizational hierarchy, as well as help sensitize leaders to their needs. Peers can be a great source of social support and encouragement because they understand and experience the same organizational pressures, which can lead to breakthrough insight and advice. Superiors can help knowledge seekers understand the big picture, practice foresight, handle more complex issues and prepare for larger responsibilities.

“At McDonald’s, we believe in the Ray Kroc quote, ‘None of us is as good as all of us,’” Harris said. Their online mentoring and knowledge-sharing process “embodies our open door and welcoming policy. I know that it will help us continue to identify and nurture talent around the globe.”

Myth: Knowledge sharing should occur within pre-existing, homogenous networks.

Fact: The inherent value in an inclusive knowledge network is that it will change and grow over time, as individuals’ learning needs change and grow. Colleagues with diverse points of view and values will come and go within these networks, playing different roles at different times, and they will bring in new connections and new insights as time passes.

If people let their networks become static or allow them to lose the fluid nature of the interactions over time, individuals will become less effective at addressing needs that require new information, perspectives or ideas. To create and innovate, people have to suspend what they know and preconceived ideas about where their ideas and thoughts will take them long enough to ponder other possibilities.

Diversity executives can promote this by leveraging enabling technologies, such as communities of practice, wikis, blogs and mentoring software, that facilitate connections based solely on knowledge and learning needs, and help overcome organizational boundaries such as location, job function and job titles. Keeping a fresh and ever-changing network of collaborators from throughout the organization will push people to look beyond what they already know and explore the emerging opportunities before them.

McDonald’s long history of peer networks has evolved over the years, providing an example of how processes can change and how knowledge can flow throughout a massive global organization with some 1.7 million employees in its knowledge-sharing network. “When black franchisees came to McDonald’s in the late 1960s, they began working with each other to share experiences on how to run better restaurants and serve more customers with outstanding quality, service, cleanliness and value,” Harris said. “Their support model became the foundation for other ethnic operator associations, employee business networks and resource groups that now literally reach around the world.”

Creating Competitive Advantage

The tangible value inclusion can bring to organizations has never been greater. Broad, diverse, fluid and ever-changing knowledge networks will help employees gather and disseminate critical information needed to help them do their jobs better. These networks can be easily built and nourished through modern mentoring technology, and organizations that support them will gain a competitive edge as well.

“Knowledge constitutes a valuable and intangible asset for creating and sustaining competitive advantage,” said Reeves of Sodexo. “Sharing information, skills and expertise helps employees know how to address client relation issues, navigate within the Sodexo culture, spread best practices and lessons learned on processes or programs, provide tips on managing people, learn about other business segments in Sodexo, explore internal career moves and more.” «

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