

Views of knowledge are human views

by G. Dueck

Different people see knowledge management from different perspectives. Some people emphasize intellectual capital, some people always think about technology, whereas others put community building first. In this essay, I associate the different views of knowledge with personality types. In other words, a person's temperament determines that person's view of knowledge—a remarkable coincidence. Therefore, a person's answer to the question "What is knowledge?" is strongly related to the answer to "Who am I?" Hence, an enterprise should be careful when defining knowledge management for its use, lest its definition imply "who the employee should be."

What is knowledge management (KM)? And how does one precisely define "knowledge"? Even the experts do not have a ready and widely accepted definition of what KM really is. Knowledge management is still seen to be in a phase of self-discovery. We can better describe what it is *not* by using sentences such as "Knowledge is more than just information or data."

A Lotus Development Corporation White Paper defines KM by its five technology pillars: business intelligence, collaboration, knowledge transfer, knowledge discovery and mapping, and locating expertise.¹ On the other hand, community building, knowledge dissemination, and explicit and tacit knowledge are also elements of KM.

From Larry Prusak I first heard that the ancient Greeks differentiated between four kinds of knowledge:²

- *Episteme*—abstract generalizations, basis and essence of sciences; scientific laws and principles
- *Techne*—technical know-how, being able to get things done, manuals, communities of practice
- *Phronesis*—practical wisdom, drawn from social practice
- *Metis*—"It is what the flair, the knack and the bent of the successful politician is made of: a form of knowledge which is at the opposite end of metaphysics, with no quest of ideal, but a search for a practical end; an embodied, incarnate, substantial form of knowledge."³

We observe in today's KM communities that we are still struggling to integrate such different dimensions of knowledge into a unified approach to KM. Conferences devoted to knowledge management usually include parallel sessions in which the technologists, the "community people," or the "economical, value seeking" managers discuss their own way of understanding KM. The introductory, plenary talks, however, deal very often with a more general topic: How can KM help an enterprise to win, to lead, to impart a vision, to look ahead? What is *Metis* today?

Thus, we see a trend toward a certain compartmentalization with the following dimensions:

- The technology dimensions: Lotus groupware products, search engines, intellectual capital man-

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agement (ICM) databases, and capture technologies are all intended to solve the KM problem technologically (the motto is: “Let’s have the finest technology”).

- The organizational or “logistical” dimension: How is knowledge captured, managed, stored, disseminated, replicated, and reused? What are the recipes, manuals, and processes for managing knowledge effectively in order to harvest economical value (motto: “Let’s create the utmost economic value from our knowledge assets”)?
- The social dimension: Emphasis is on sharing of knowledge between people, building communities of knowledge workers, sharing personal experiences, building effective (and socially satisfying) networks of people, establishing corporate culture, coaching, mentoring (motto: “Let’s share knowledge as with friends we trust”).

In discussions on KM most people tend to overvalue one single aspect of knowledge, while downplaying all the other dimensions. Following are some typical (paraphrased) comments from attendees of the KM conference in Reference 2:

- I saw several new exciting technologies I wish I knew about sooner. I got some of them on a CD. I am really excited and can hardly wait to go back to my office and try them out.
- For the real management of knowledge we need accepted definitions and processes. Discussions, innovations, and technologies are one thing, getting it done another. We need recipes and manuals on how to do KM. I am really concerned about this excessive debating. Without a doubt, execution is everything.
- The opportunity to network is the most valuable component of this conference. I met here many new people with common interests.

Many experts feel that we have “only” to integrate these different views of KM into a common framework. This essay is intended as a wake-up call. It identifies a factor that plays a critical role in the discussion and that has been neglected so far: the role of the personality type in adopting a point of view toward KM.

Let me explain. Two million Americans undergo testing every year in order to find out their Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)⁴ or their Keirsey⁵ temperament. These tests are based on the theory of psychological types originally introduced by C. G. Jung in the beginning of the 1920s. Although there are

many similar tests, many psychologists view these tests as only relevant to traits or dimensions of character. For this essay I selected the most frequently used test, the Keirsey temperament test, which is freely available on the Web.⁶ (I do not think that the choice of the test has great influence on the major points I make in this essay.) According to Keir-

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sey there are four different temperaments: the Corporate Guardian, the Utilitarian Artisan, the Cooperative Idealist, and the Utilitarian Rational.

- *Corporate Guardians* are caretakers, caregivers, and savers. They display a parental attitude, hope for a better world, are eager to gain status through hard work, and are inclined to be responsible and loyal. Their highest goal is to become an executive. They excel in teaching and management. Keirsey attributes “logistical intelligence” to Guardians.
- *Utilitarian Artisans* love work as play. They are interested in work as clever and fun activity rather than in its goals. They are afraid to be bored. They like to be bold, brave, adaptive, and impulsive. They hate hierarchies and bureaucracy. Their highest goal is to be a virtuoso. They can mobilize what it takes to achieve virtuosity: hours of concentrated effort. Keirsey attributes “tactical intelligence” to the Artisans.
- *Cooperative Idealists* are in search of the self, are people-centered and relations-centered. They long for a perfectly unique identity, fear being lost in a crowd. They value authenticity, hate masks and role playing, and are passionate in the pursuit of creative action toward a vision of perfection. They are future-oriented and long for a unique and accomplished personality. Keirsey attributes “diplomatic intelligence” to the Idealists.
- *Utilitarian Rationals* focus on competence, repertoire, and the need to improve every day. They do not have a strong interest in actions as such, but work under a stringent self-imposed standard of excellence, and they live for their work: work is work, play is work, fun is work. They often communicate at a level of abstraction others might find unintelligible and they tend to put work aside when

the real challenge has been mastered. They have no function-lust⁵ like the Artisans and they are not always sensitive to the complexities of interpersonal relations. They are science and technology people, and possess “strategical intelligence.”

In order to understand knowledge management, it is necessary, I think, to imagine how persons of these temperaments might describe what KM is about.

- *Corporate Guardian*: “First of all, we have to define what KM is. It is not necessary to implement processes to find the truth. We just need a notion of KM that is useful in practice. It must emphasize the need to manage knowledge in a way that allows us to reuse knowledge for the benefit of our organization. We have to capture and harvest all useful knowledge. We have to be concerned with security in order to ensure that no knowledge is lost. KM standards and participation in standardization processes are a must. The management will communicate in a standard way to all the employees. KM processes will enable the company to act as a whole. Everyone uses the same terminology, speaks the same language, and the enterprise speaks with one voice to its customers. KM makes the company a team and a unified force” (see the *Techne* interpretation of knowledge given earlier).
- *Utilitarian Artisan*: “I am learning from my master. I need the knowledge in my body and in my fingertips. I watch excellence at work. I try to sense the excellence in masterpieces. My own work will ultimately be performed by my expert hand. I do not need knowledge management at all. I need just the master. You know what I mean? Maybe you’ll say it’s coaching or mentoring. It’s not. It’s the master” (*Phronesis*).
- *Cooperative Idealist*: “In our world of matrix organizations, we see that projects and organizational structures are coming and going. The processes are in a continuous process of change. The only stable element is each individual’s personal network. You have to be a member in well-established communities of colleagues and friends. You have to join a great world of sharing and caring, a world of satisfying personal interrelationships. The new mantras at work are now *trust* and *interdependence*. We need KM to reach everyone and to form communities. We need the tools, of course, but we also need people, because each community needs a leader who is the very heart of it. That’s all.”
- *Utilitarian Rational*: “I know 95 percent, say, of everything within my field of expertise. The hard problem is to know virtually all of it. I need a lot

of search technology to find what I still don’t know. I need databases to have easy access to them. I hate educational surveys and “soft” psychological knowledge. I hate one-day courses that promise you will be able to understand another universe. I hate all the trivial manual-style recipe books written by clerks. I hate all educational efforts toward standardization. I am a guru. The standard is the antithesis of the outstanding. If management requires my buying into standards, this amounts to coercion (*Episteme*).

The conclusion is rather obvious. Although people are different, the same persons are not always aware of these differences. Thus, when discussing the notion of KM they tend to consider their own way of viewing KM as the only way to view it. This leads one to adopt the attitude that says “Please be like me. My way is the only way.” When a person of one temperament tries to convert a person of a different temperament to his or her way of thinking, this amounts to undertaking a Pygmalion project, as Keirsey calls it. Although Mr. Higgins may succeed in turning Eliza into a Fair Lady, a Utilitarian Rational cannot be changed into a Guardian or vice versa.

Statistics show that at large American companies somewhat more than 60 percent of the executives are Guardians. At IBM Global Services we asked *all* of our 105 Certified Architects (gurus, say) and about 200 new hires to take the test at the Keirsey site.⁶ Somewhat more than 40 percent of these individuals are Utilitarian Rationals and another 20 to 25 percent are Cooperative Idealists. These two types seem to dominate the sectors of science, computer manufacturing, and computer services. The rest of the employees are mainly Guardians. This statistic differs very much from the population at large. Keirsey estimates that in the total population, three of eight people are Guardians, three of eight are Artisans, one of eight is an Idealist, one of eight is a Rational.⁵

If KM practices are to be established in a large company, it is likely that the corporate management (“Guardians”) will try to establish the use of definitions, standards, and standard tools across the corporation. It will talk about best practices, reuse, and standards for certification. On the other side, some professionals will resist those attempts, because the discussion about the “right” KM approach involves the core values of the different temperaments.

