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Book Review

The Knowing-Doing Gap

By Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton

When one company copies what another successful company does, expecting to achieve the same success, and that success does not come, why is that? If this question does not drive to the heart of all of the discussion of knowledge management per se and intellectual capital I can think of no other question as germane to the topic as this one. Although Pfeffer and Sutton's book is not about knowledge management, it is about knowledge management by implication. It receives a high recommendation on my list for anyone interested in why some companies are successful at what they do and why some are not.

The fundamental idea of the book is expressed in the title. There appears to be a gap between a company knowing what to do and actually doing what it knows. It is somewhat misleading to speak of a company as knowing and doing because in reality it is the people of the company that both know and do and that even though the people that may make up the company may know they may not do. In terms of knowledge management and intellectual capital - you can make extensive amounts of knowledge available to people in the company and that knowledge may actually be meaningless to the bottom line if the context in which that knowledge is available does not translate from knowing into doing.

Pfeffer and Sutton's book identifies five impediments to doing. These are: talk, memory, fear, measurement, and competition. I believe in selecting their title and using the word "gap" Pfeffer and Sutton were being kind - personally to me these impediments are more like a great chasm or bottomless pit that one might find oneself in when trying to translate knowing into doing. In each of these areas of impediment Pfeffer and Sutton discuss examples of companies that have surmounted the impediment, and those that have not. Examples are drawn from companies like General Motors, Saturn, SAS, BP, Continental Airlines, and the Men's Warehouse all illustrate the how companies succumb to or overcome the impediments.

Consider the following from the chapter on talk,

"In some organizations that we studied there seemed to be an unspoken, but powerful belief that once a decision had been made to do something, no additional work was needed to make sure it was implemented."

How many times have we seen this in organizations? You attend a meeting, and a decision is made. You leave the meeting and that is all that is done - nothing changes. Later on in the same chapter, Pfeffer and Sutton give another example of how talk inhibits action.

"Unfortunately, using complex language and ambiguous terminology confuses people and inhibits action. One organization we studied gave employees laptop computers to provide them access to e-mail and the Internet, but describe this as a transformation to a virtual organization. This jargon confused people ... resulted in weeks of spreading rumors (e.g. our office is closing ...)"

Throughout each of the chapters Pfeffer and Sutton provide lists of symptoms that one should be on the look out for in identifying the various impediments. These lists would be key to assessing the potential of the organization for acting on its knowledge.

In essence most of the considerations addressed by this work can be distilled to elements of the culture of the organization. And in most cases Pfeffer and Sutton clearly point out that a particular impediment was in fact promoted by management at some level. The importance of this observation cannot be understated. In the case of success one can construe this to mean that some organizational cultures are predisposed to success while others are not. In the context of knowledge management it is a clear predictor of the impediments one might encounter in creating a knowledge management program in a particular culture.

I would highly recommend this book to anyone interested in reading a well-put together treatment of how some organizations can be successful through the application of knowledge while others can't traverse the gap. I would also consider it required reading for any

practitioner of knowledge management. The book can be purchased on Amazon.com at: [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

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