Tacit and Explicit Knowledge

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The following was adapted from an article in the November-December 1991 issue of Harvard Business Review. It is based on experience in Japan where people think our preoccupation in the West with hard (i.e. quantifiable) knowledge can be disadvantageous and may yield too narrow a viewpoint. The article relates ideas to ideals and talks about the importance of making personal knowledge available to others in your company.

One anecdote included in the article narrated how a company tried unsuccessfully to manufacture a bread making machine for use in the home. To try and solve their problems they went to the best hotel in Tokyo and studied with the head baker, watching how he kneaded dough. This led to the design of the machine being modified and ultimately to success in the marketplace. The article described how the baker's "tacit knowledge" (cognitive skills) had to be translated into the "explicit knowledge" they needed in order to make the bread maker work right. This helped, for example, to transfer his knowledge to other people involved in the design and manufacture of the machine.

Many small business owners can envisage projects which could improve their operations. Some of these may best be undertaken by transferring tacit (unspoken) knowledge to other people explicitly via an improved manufacturing process, a "how to" manual or whatever. To transfer such knowledge and mass produce the related skills typically demands personal commitment from a lot of people:

- skilled people articulating their knowledge (often very difficult for them)
- the company developing a new approach (possibly a "vision" incorporating really disparate concepts but remaining open to ideas from others)
- the employees internalizing a new approach.

Converting tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge may be helped by using figurative language. This is discussed in detail in the article but includes:

- linguistically linking contradictory things and ideas through metaphor
- resolving the contradictions using analogies
- crystallizing the created concepts into a model which makes the knowledge available to the rest of the company.

Redundancy (duplication of capabilities) is frequently regarded in the West as a waste of resources. In Japan it is regarded more positively and fostered by various means including rotating employees between departments and providing employees with free access to company

information. Redundancy encourages dialog and internal competition. As new information spreads around a corporation it frequently causes confusion but confusion can be a good thing if management can make it challenge employees to re-examine how things are done.

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