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Developing Personal Knowledge
1.1 Strong Concept

The most distinctive quality of a strong concept is that it does not seem familiar.¹

My career as a ‘knowledge activist’ began at the end of 1997 when I realized that knowledge management had the potential for ending the management tendency to worship and purchase contextual problem-solving techniques that tended to obsolesce in the same, predictable way. This Coyote-like acquisition of new, more complex technologies to pursue the same old Roadrunner meant that consultants were sharpening their old knives even as knowledge management began to ramp up that first Fad-Model Slope whilst the parasitic lost tribes of knowledge management formed and began talking at conferences and publishing their empty books. And how they talked and
published. They talked until I found that my suggestion of providing a translator as well as a signing correspondent for the deaf began to be taken seriously by conference organizers as well as audiences. And the conference folders got fatter, and the $2 \times 2$ matrices became even more involved.

The key to the problem was that all three lost tribes of knowledge management were convinced that they had already been doing knowledge all along and could go on with repackaging their old products without having to develop any new thinking. The customers would never notice. The lost tribe of Information Technology gave us systems that ordered structured data but failed to deliver any information, far less knowledge. The lost tribe of organizational learning refused to learn from this phenomenon; and the final lost tribe of lean production continued to write fatter books and still missed the idea at heart of their ideology being about the timing of money and little else. They all looked toward a technical solution for the shambles of the internet, and a computer-based approach that would replace the need for creativity or to think anything new at all. It is not surprising that none of these approaches worked.

But was there any alternative? The job of the knowledge activist is always to do something countercultural and creative. This activist approach attacked the issue of knowledge management in three ways: first, to try to identify a question that could open up the issue, and second, to adopt an out-of-the-box approach by shifting my perspective of knowledge management from that of an academic or a consultant to that of a CEO. I have learnt much from coaching and mentoring CEOs, and found that the pressures on their time mean that they need to more disciplined in the way they look at things than everyone else. The adoption of a CEO perspective on knowledge management had already helped to formulate simple approaches on knowledge leadership that seemed to work. I combined the open question and the CEO perspective with the third idea: reverse visualization. Instead of asking CEOs how they ‘did’ knowledge management, I asked them to try to visualize the symptoms of successful knowledge
management and then work backwards, summarizing these symptoms into key messages.

The results seemed a little bit odd, but ultimately very useful.

Initially, the 12 CEOs kept asking me to explain what knowledge management was, and I had to refuse to answer, pointing out that it was important for them to develop their own perspective before I explained my views. I promised to explain my views after the workshop, when we had discussed the results.

In essence, they developed five messages from the exercise of visualizing successful knowledge management for themselves.

• **Language vacuum.** They didn’t like the word ‘knowledge’ because it could mean anything to anyone and they didn’t like ‘Management’ because it implied that whatever this ‘knowledge’ was, it could be managed like a passive material, stored, located physically and allocated like a physical resource. This led to thinking about a phrase like ‘knowledge work’ having more meaning than knowledge management.

• **Tight/Hard – Soft/Loose.** Success requires attention to everyday disciplines that focus attention and engineer mistakes out of everyday
decisions and processes. Unless there were tight/hard disciplines to manage repetitive work, not enough time could be freed up to go ‘scouting’: to visualize and visit alternative future scenarios to test out prevailing assumptions about the enterprise.

• **Extra/Intramaps.** A virtual technology was required to construct complementary strategy maps of the past, present and potential future. These ‘extramaps’ show the landscape of the global knowledge economy external to its internal knowledge economy. The ‘intramap’ enables the enterprise to check out its internal configuration to exploit new opportunities as well as engineer them into the environment of the extramap.

• **Visible people assets.** That individuals would understand their own responsibility for managing their personal ‘brand’ within the organization; in a world where there is no HR function, just individuals managing their own intellectual capital and realizing its value within the internal people market of the enterprise.

• **Applying what we know and making no repetitive mistakes.** This is the big one, to apply what we actually know! There is much that we know about where to leverage environments and mechanisms for success, and yet we ignore the cognitive equivalent of Feng-Shui unless it is sold within a brand like Neurolinguistic Programming or equivalents. Similarly, we know much about incompetence and our own potential to build our learning into everyday processes. And yet organizations end up with thousands of after-action reports and don’t know how to bring them to the attention of individuals.
Implications

1 Knowledge activism is creative and largely personal. It is the product of two complementary reinforcing processes of theft and invention, involving the generation of new models, followed by the application of these new models to old experiences, and the application of new experience to old models. All models and experiences come with a sell-by date. Having a low boredom threshold is essential.

2 Try this exercise for yourself. Pretend that you have never read this and visualize successful knowledge management for yourself, noting each symptom of success on a separate Post-it. Group these symptoms into families on a whiteboard, looking for those which are Common or Special and noticing the Missing. Fill the gaps in ‘Missing’, then meditate on the pattern you have created for yourself. Can you see anything new?

3 Keep applying this process until you notice something new. Then do something about it.

Note

One of the interesting things about knowledge is that you often don’t know what you know until someone asks you a good question.

I was approached by a group of serious-faced executives after a masterclass session and asked to give them some advice on what looked like an unique problem. They felt that they were overpaid for what they were doing and despite their excellent equity shareholdings they were considering resigning because, although their organization was a performer with admirable positioning within the Fortune 500, they felt that this success had very little to do with their individual performance. They felt that it was time to resign and go somewhere where they could make a personal impact on the success of an organization, perhaps start their own business before they got too lazy. They asked my advice. This may have been a mistake, of course, but it triggered
a series of thoughts that influenced the things I found myself saying in the months that followed.

Part of my advice was that they dedicate one day a month to creating a new form of knowledge for themselves. But knowledge about what? I suggested they start by identifying motherhood statements within their organization that they instinctively knew to be empty or meaningless, then deconstruct these using the child’s repetitive ‘why?’ question until they got to what seemed to be the root causes and then finally go on to develop alternative, better explanations or models which could then be shared. At the very least this would create a sense of primacy, and could possibly lead to something new happening. Later on, it struck me that this is what is largely missing from knowledge literature: how to create a new form of knowledge. In other words, the problem of knowledge management begins with the issue of creating a new form of knowledge, and is followed with the problem of exploitation.

A common question for consulting speakers from a conference floor is the one about the extent to which ‘knowledge sharing’ is rewarded. The major consultancies tend to give the same message that such sharing is rewarded. But the issue remains: if you don’t define ‘knowledge’ as being opportunity-based, what is being shared? How much of it is novel or just recycled? Who assigns value to it? How long will it be before desperate employees will start going to independent and bootleg knowledge suppliers on the internet for their promotional knowledge?

As Kent Greene once said, ‘make sure you have a customer for your knowledge’. Without a customer or a context for applying it, the knowledge can’t be seen as valuable. The problem of context means that the time-based nature of a piece of knowledge has to be understood. As in problem-solving; you often don’t know you have a problem until you see someone else’s solution. So sharing knowledge isn’t the problem, the real problem is expressing or creating a crisis or context for creating new forms of knowledge and supporting individuals and interest-groups in taking that knowledge to market. Knowledge sharing suggests that someone else is going to make
it happen. What is usually missing in organizations is an explicit Knowledge-to-Internal-Market process (K2iM) to fast-track the application of internally-generated competitive knowledge internally, with a sister Knowledge-to-External-Market process (K2exM). With such explicit processes shared across the organization, anyone would have the potential to create a new form of knowledge and take it to market. This issue was underlined by some work I was doing on an internal creativity program for a consultancy. I asked for case studies that demonstrated that creativity had made an impact on the bottom line. It turned out that there were few, and most had been done in spite of senior management. It seems that a better question to ask consultancies isn’t how they reward knowledge sharing, but how much of their new knowledge has become an internal product that has changed the way that they work, and what examples have seen it become products sold and used by other people.

Managing knowledge is like preparing a dessert for dinner with a group of close friends. Which is likely to taste better and be the most appreciated: the dessert prepared from the fruit you grew yourself, the one with tinned fruit, or the prepared fruit dessert bought at a supermarket?
Implications

1 Create a knowledge crisis and communicate it. Admit you don’t know the answers and that the asset technology you’re exploiting now won’t last forever.

2 Develop and share explicit knowledge to internal and external market processes. Make these processes as basic, fundamental and available as First Aid.

3 Encourage the creation of new forms of knowledge, skunk-works knowledge prototyping and associated development of new customers.

4 Don’t send your people on management development programmes, instead give them the money to invest in making their new form of knowledge work and let them keep the return. Encourage them to share the lessons of success and failure at an internal Knowledge Fair.
Tightrope walkers crossing chasms between tall buildings resist the pressure from gusting winds by balancing a pole horizontally as they walk. Their balancing-pole allows them to move forward. Organizations, like tightrope walkers with their pole, must take up a position along the continuum that exists between two extremes. At one end is knowledge management, which is concerned with managing what we know about what we do. At the other end is knowledge development, which is to do with creating new forms of knowledge that introduce discontinuity and generate new market value. Knowledge management is static and tends to focus on managing knowledge around an existing process, and is invariably connected to price and risk-reduction strategies. Knowledge development is dynamic and
continually redefines the knowledge worth managing and leads to the creation of new value.

The price of adopting extreme positions within the continuum can be deadly. For instance, those organizations that disconnected their scenario learning activities and invested in managing knowledge around a technology and process for delivering a commodity are laying off large populations at this moment and merging operations to reduce market capacity and process costs.

Organizations that make a strategy of positioning themselves at the knowledge development extreme run the risk of having too many ideas to play with. They have succeeded in moving themselves up the global Market Capitalization Value rankings to find that investors now require last year’s landmark product introduction to be succeeded by perhaps two this year, four in the following year, and have to raise the level of their game without knowing how.

Corporate management may at this point become victims of organizational groupthink. Few individuals, especially those participating in the hike in equity values, are likely to consider the possibility that this year’s success was an accident. In the absence of a discrete model of the cause of the landmark product’s success, they do the next best thing and begin to believe that the absence of disciplined thinking is itself a success formula that needs to be reinforced. And before you know it, you’re all wearing flared trousers and sporting beards. I am always reminded of what a friend working in Apple said about the last CEO before Steve Jobs returned: ‘I knew we were finished when he [the CEO] stopped wearing ties.’

Let me tell you about a recent exercise in knowledge capture. Three key individuals left a business and, prior to departure, were
intensively debriefed as to what they knew. The exercise was highly therapeutic for the subjects and much useful data was recorded. It was only six months later that the debrief team realized that the slant of their questions had been misdirected. They had been asking the wrong questions. Instead of what the individuals knew, they should have asked more about their internal cause and effect models, in other words: what do you know about why we succeeded? Can you help us in modelling this process so that we can exploit it? A perennial question on the consulting skills module within the Knowledge Management and Innovation programme I used to run at Cranfield University was: ‘when will I know everything?’ What lies underneath this question is a natural fear of exposure on the part of the postgraduate, of appearing to be incompetent in what is seen as a harsh and unforgiving commercial environment. It is only when individuals are forced to work in alien subject areas, facilitating often introverted specialists through generic problem-solving processes, that they realize that you don’t need to know everything. All you need is the ability to ask good questions, especially the repetitive, child’s question: why?

I am often reminded of Groucho Marx’s famous quote to the effect that he would never join any club that would accept someone like himself as a member. In the face of market success and investors’ heightened expectations due to successful knowledge development and its exploitation in the form of a stable application, a similar dog-in-the-manger attitude is required to explore and understand the emergent process that delivered it, asking the simple child’s question, tracking and modelling the hidden, perhaps serendipitous, process to transform it from what is not even tacit, but pre-tacit or emergent, involving many individuals, make it explicit and then manage it as a form of knowledge.
Implications

1. Ensure that your knowledge work balances knowledge management with knowledge development.

2. The way to repeat the success that springs from the introduction of a new form of knowledge is to invest in explicitly managing the knowledge around the fractured, emergent process that got you there in the first place.

3. Continuously redefine the knowledge that is worth managing: metaphorically set fire to the business (metaphorically) and watch which bits are retrieved from the flames, and by whom.

4. Be prepared to follow Nike's strategy of deliberately choosing to slow your pace of innovation for a period in order to invest time in making explicit the fractured and emergent knowledge in your time-to-market or commercialization process.
A consultant friend worked for an international corporation. For the first three years he worked very hard, introducing lean production techniques into the business. This meant introducing measurement systems, benchmarking methodologies and eliminating waste in many forms through involvement and empowerment. He also made recommendations that led to new information systems whose implementation he led. The arrival of the interest in the learning organization allowed him to integrate everything he had laboured over into a coherent whole. When the knowledge revolution began to grow, he was convinced that what he had been doing had been part of that revolution. But one day, after three years of hard work across the corporation’s plants around the world, he was allowed a glimpse of the real business knowledge that drove the organization. And to his
initial sense of disbelief, this ‘real’ knowledge had nothing to do with efficiency, utilization or the involvement of large numbers of people. This ‘real’ knowledge turned out to be about knowing when to get into a market, when to get out; how to create value in that market and manage its decline. This knowledge was shared between three key individuals and by being allowed to see it, my friend was being invited to participate in a very privileged game.

The question he kept asking himself, was: how could he have missed the real knowledge for so long? How could he have confused what turned out to be minor tactics with a strategy?

This issue of perception is exemplified when reading Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*. For many readers, it is a confusing text from 512 BC written in the period known as the ‘Warring States’. Modern readers of Sun Tzu’s *Art of War* share the same alienation effect experienced by readers of parallel texts like Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, Clausewitz’s *On War*, or Musashi’s *A Book of Five Rings*. This disturbing alienation is an essential and deliberate part of designing knowledge to be communicated across centuries and cultures for action. This explains why such texts are not usually studied. Sun Tzu is ultimately accessible because we all imagine that we understand war, and its apparently shared context provides a basis from which to approach the text and its meaning.

A challenge I sometimes posed for MBA students was to select three Sun Tzu quotes from a collection of my favourite ten, and ask them to explain their meaning. This usually leads to stunned silence. I would then go through the ten and explain what I believe they mean. After two or three, they begin to catch on. The disappearance of an education founded on analysing texts and summarizing findings means they need some help to get going, but they get there. The next step is to invite them to shift these quotes out of their original historical context into the current business reality to create advantage or new value. Again, this is initially very confusing because no one has ever asked them to do this. They are MBA students in the MBA factory: they are here to consume what they think is knowledge, not to think for themselves or to create their own knowledge. But after a few examples they catch on, and are generally astonished at how what
appeared to be a closed text, from an exotic and remote past, can have real meaning and application in today's business reality.

Later, when we examine how the Sun Tzu text actually made them feel when they were working on the quotes, the answer is interesting: Sun Tzu's text makes them feel scared and cold because he is telling them something from his own world; there are only two types of people in Sun Tzu, the predator and the victim. This antithesis is a common theme on high-flier management development and serious MBA programmes.

The full text of Sun Tzu has probably only four great themes worked out within the 13 chapters.

1. **Deception and disguise.** Hide your real strategy; your real strengths and weaknesses.
2. **Timing.** Always be in control of timing. International terrorists are always the first to start and to break truces. Introduce the market leader, and always kill it yourself with your own replacement.
3. **The killing ground.** Always get to the battlefield or market first to choose the best positions, channel your competition into the worst ground or least profitable markets.
4. **Movement.** When you implement your strategy, visualize it like a torrent that sweeps away boulders, don't hit just one isolated objective but a complete, winning sequence. Make it fast and last longer than they expect.

So what can we learn from books like these? First, that if they don't alienate us, make us feel uncomfortable, then they are unlikely to contain any elements of 'real' knowledge. Although few reading Sun Tzu's text have experienced war beyond films and TV reportage, there is a common shared context that enables us to imagine we understand. However, the experience is far richer for anyone who has studied military history, served as a volunteer in the military reserves, run their own business and perhaps tried to lead people to do something different. Translating Sun Tzu must be a personal process: don't buy translations, do it for yourself. When you have annotated your
text, synthesize it into your own language, then try to connect your synthesis by jumping your translation into the business context. Then apply it.

By understanding how these books work, and the way they use creativity in deliberately forcing us to take something from a strange context and apply it within a familiar context, and vice versa, we can understand how real knowledge is created and how it actually works and avoid consuming commodity information. Tim Jackson’s *Inside Intel* and Goldratt’s *The Goal* are classic examples of Sun Tzu’s knowledge and technique applied.

### Implications

1. Look for the ‘real’ knowledge, the knowledge that underpins the perpetually recycled packaging hype.
2. Don’t read modern books about strategy unless they alienate you or make you feel uncomfortable.
3. Practice translating the text for its emergent message and then try shifting it to new contexts and see what happens.

### Notes

1.5
How To Go on
a Dead Cat Hunt

Understanding the levels of knowledge operating within an organization is just like tracing the source of an organizational ‘dead cat’ (a problem that keeps re-appearing, and which no one wants to touch because it may mean confronting powerful people or values within the culture). Trying to solve this kind of problem is an useful way of defining the necessary types of knowledge that have to be successfully integrated together to manage change in an organization. Tracking down and eradicating the source of dead cat problems can take you to the heart of the organization and the knowledge that's really driving it.

When you are tracing the source of dead cat problems, it is vital to understand both the levels of knowledge and the associated language of problem solving that the organization is willing to permit.
I characterize the primary levels of knowledge encountered through hunting the source of dead cat issues as being task, followed by process, behavioural system and, finally, environmental model. Understanding the language of problem solving in an organization is key to gaining traction and building engagement at a senior level when trying to understand why things really happen, but the issue of problem-solving language has its own contradictions.

First, it is often the case that until an organization sees a solution that is being applied by a competitor, it will continue to believe that it does not have a problem to solve. So the contradiction that has to be resolved is: which comes first, the problem or the solution? Without a problem, there is no incentive to think at deeper levels of knowledge other than task. Second, the solution tends to carry with it its own jargon and problem definition that are themselves the by-product of applying a new and successful technology. Once a company recognizes a solution to a problem that it didn’t even know existed, it then has to deal with attempting to understand a language that is solution- and not problem-centred. This probably explains the need to implement major changes in organizations up to three times before they actually take. The real difficulty of implementing significant change is one of linguistic translation and acquisition. If you don't have the language, you literally can't describe the problem, much less solve it. It’s not surprising that organizations sometimes choose to redefine the problem as one they are already equipped to solve, and to ignore the real problem and the real knowledge gap that it faces.

Going back to the organizational problem-solving levels of task, process, behavioural system and environmental model, consultants tend to get called into organizations to solve problems that no one wants to touch. Understanding these problems involves interviewing lots of people and sometimes discovering that this problem has an archaeology all of its own. Some interviewees will smile patronisingly at the eager consultant as if to say, 'Here comes another one.' With a bit of luck, a kind interviewee will delve deep into a dusty recess and bring out a small collection of previous attempts to work on the problem. At this point, the consultant will do one of two things:
become deeply depressed because they sense that they, too, are likely
to meet the same fate; or decide to save a lot of time and pirate the
content of their predecessors’ reports for themselves.

But what has been going on? Let me explain. Essentially, what is
seen by day-to-day management as a task, is actually the by-product
of a process that is itself kept from working properly by someone who
is being consistently rewarded for doing something stupid by someone
who no longer understands how the business really works. Someone
somewhere is being paid very well for making your life a mess. And
they don’t know it.

But problems start out as tasks; and individuals get told to just
go and sort it out. Curiosity and a bit of consultant archaeology may
identify the source of the repetitious problem as being a process that
doesn’t work as it should. At this point the process becomes the centre
of attention and more fun and games begin as a problem-solving team
begins to map the process, walking through political mine- and mind-
fields of internal organizations based on functional knowledge, and
occasionally preaching the unthinkable idea that the organization
based on functional knowledge, in blindly replicating the traditional
academic model, is failing the organization. After much trauma, a
new process model is defined, but unless the old functional knowledge
structure is wiped out and replaced by a process knowledge structure,
and a new behaviour system that rewards behaviours that help the
process to work properly, this new process model that was designed
to destroy the repetitive task or organizational dead cat, will become
a fiction and the problem will re-emerge.

My personal research and experience in Business Process Re-
engineering taught me that failure was not due to the redesign of
the business process but due to the failure to go to the next level
and redesign the behavioural system that drives behaviours. Once
the behavioural system is itself mapped and understood, its parent
needs to be confronted, and this is usually a core group of very senior
managers, often role models who need to be handled very carefully in
order to encourage them to articulate their own personal cause and
effect models of how things actually (in their own minds) work in the
business. Care has to be taken at this point, because it is likely that their core, shared environmental model of cause and effect is obsolete or based on an organization or world that no longer exists. In effect their core, personal knowledge, the knowledge that has got them where they are today, may be deeply flawed. This kind of epiphany can be earth-shattering, so take care.

### Implications

1. Without shared problem-solving language and models, it is very difficult to explain new problems and specify new knowledge gaps.
2. Unless serious effort is made to identify the source of organizational dead cats, life will tend to resemble the plot of *Groundhog Day*, where every day is identical even though the protagonists are convinced it’s unique.
3. Without language and commitment to building the necessary knowledge levels that prevent the manufacture of dead-cat tasks, there will never be enough time to change anything worthwhile.
4. If you really want to change an organization, work backwards through the knowledge levels, beginning at understanding the prevailing environmental model of cause and effect.