

Ego Tripped

If companies wanted to truly understand accomplished models of knowledge sharing, they would observe the collaborative practices of today's high-school students. The hallmark of my children's academic experience has been utilizing technology to its fullest extent, leveraging both the access and community it fosters in ways that initially made me uncomfortable.

First it was posting grades online, but soon thereafter it was virtual classrooms or blackboards, in which group chats, submitting assignments and even viewing others' assignments were the norm. There were more than a few occasions that I, in perhaps a moment of showing my age, thought, "How is this not a form of cheating?"

Ultimately, I came to realize that while the lines have been blurred, it was I who needed to let go of what I understood as 'normal.' We were the generation for whom self-reliance and independent achievement was the rule, but have now given way to a generation that recognizes beauty in transparency and true sharing.

I'm a little envious of them, honestly. I wish I could be a student today, where not only does technology allow knowledge to be shared at a far greater rate, delivering a more complete understanding of coursework; it also allows social group settings to live inside the class, at homes, or on one's laptop or mobile device.

My kids seamlessly integrate all forms of technology to stay current with their coursework through a constant loop of feedback between teachers, administrators and even their own classmates. This is a deeper, more meaningful opportunity that they have to learn. Each student isn't alone in the fortress of his or her own work or endeavors.

They don't have to live with the singular feedback or validation that used to come from handing in an assignment and waiting for the approval of a teacher. They receive guidance in meaningful and frequent ways through their student groups as they serve and volley with subject-relevant topics, tease out different answers and hypotheses, arrive at better solutions, and have a wonderful time doing so. It is a teen-team brain trust and it is terrific.

By comparison I learned in a vacuum, but I certainly can't begrudge my kids this new reality.

What of the other danger, though—the possibility that all of this 'shared chatter' could potentially lend itself to reliance on others' thoughts, like any group hierarchy? Well, I soon realized that the constancy of these study groups invited a community that was filled with living and growing seeds of thought and enthusiasm to learn.

It is something to behold. I didn't spend too much time being jealous of this level of sharing before I also realized that it should be incumbent upon me to adopt such an environment in the workplace. Huge realization: They are moving into the workforce. With us. Right now. And this is how they have learned. So, is it really a good idea to ignore this within our own organizations?

We are in the ideas business. In most industries, but particularly in ours—the sphere of marketers and innovators—ideas are our currency. In this new model of sharing, socialism reigns supreme. In the workplace of ideas, it is far greater to share the wealth and allow for fermentation and expansive knowledge. We used to be very protective of our ideas, but that thinking lacks dimension today.

The end game of knowledge sharing—as in today's classroom—is to learn the most and deepen the pool of shared knowledge in a way that will elevate the collective whole. So, can we cheat? Sure—if you're being dishonest and hiding knowledge and deciding that your personal gain far outweighs the collective goal. But if you create a climate of knowledge sharing, then those people will de-select themselves by more or less being known for their lack of sharing.

The problem is that knowledge sharing, especially as you enter into a creative realm for a living, is crucial. Yet we see it fail all of the time for a variety of reasons. As social as we have become, it seems there remains an incentive to hold tight to original ideas in the workplace. A 2013 study published in *The Academy of Management Journal* concluded that the consequences of hiding knowledge "are likely to be devastating to organizational creativity, innovation, and performance."

We all have plenty to learn from each other, so it doesn't pay to cloister teams in silos and expect the best. Having a bullpen for Millennials, as one large

A business of ideas must give everyone a voice at the table.

ad agency has created, isn't going to foster a culture steeped in knowledge sharing as much as it might perpetuate the stereotype of a generation coddled, ill-prepared and entitled. According to a recent Pew Research Center analysis of US Census Bureau data, more than one in three American workers today are Millennials (adults ages 18 to 34 in 2015), and this year they surpassed Generation X to become the largest share of the American workforce.

Learning happens both up and down, and refusal to acknowledge this surely can't bode well for a company in the long term. The biggest danger in operating this way is that by failing to foster a culture of sharing internally you may not be poised to connect effectively externally.

On the other end of the spectrum, Zappos recently announced its move to what it calls 'holacracy' — a completely employee-centric organization without traditional managers and job titles. This has proven itself to be a workable model for some organizations that adopt it early on and whose mission and culture might align with this brand of self-management.

The way holacracy has been discussed in the news media reminds me of how Google+ was touted to be 'different' and 'better' — with circles or groups instead of direct reporting. Let's just hope for Zappos' sake that holacracy has more staying power than Google+. In terms of being poised for pure idea sharing, however, this model may be closely aligned with some of the more famous innovators, such as Apple or 3M.

A bevy of knowledge-sharing options certainly may be considered. A wide array of knowledge sharing software promises to break down silos and place data at any user's fingertips. Services such as Slideshare offer free presentations on topics of your own choosing. Of course, there is also the greatest gig in the sky, or clouds, the one still taken for granted — the Internet, which is the most benevolent knowledge-sharer in the history of humankind. However, before any of these offerings can be maximized, there must be a rewrite of the genetic code of company culture.

Somewhere between holacracy and a traditional corporate matrix exists a sweet spot, I believe, that may help any organization foster knowledge sharing.

It's a culture that avoids possibly the biggest pitfall to knowledge sharing — the culture that rewards individual 'credit' over the successes of the team. This is a much easier culture to envision than to create or foster in practice. Usually, it's a constant struggle against one's own nature to put such a culture in place and practice it every day. By way of "tips" or ideas, I would offer these:

Exchange Freely. Take the free exchange of ideas and information seriously. This is a big first step — before you implement anything. It begins with leadership acknowledging that sharing ideas is important. It may also mean committing to teaching employees to ignore their pride of ownership for the sake of improving the organization by example.

Give Voice. In meetings, encourage participation among all, without regard for anyone's number of years of experience. The words "just observe for now," should never be spoken. If you have a seat at the table, you have a voice.

Foster Sharing. Make your intranet a portal for more than just Human Resources and Operations policies. By granting everyone the freedom to post inspirational ideas, you help foster a culture of sharing.

Recognize People. Rather than incentivizing people (either directly or indirectly) to hoard knowledge, make it clear that great ideas or teams are recognized.

At our organization, we have a mantra that is shared in day-one orientation for new employees and is engraved in our mission for all employees to remember each day. It is the declaration: "None of us is as good as all of us."

This is where knowledge sharing originates.
Let go of ego; ergo intellect grows. ■



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