

Focus Area Leadership

Your Focus Area: LEADERSHIP

The experience has shown that a good leadership leads employees to top performance in the area of knowledge management, if the manager takes certain principles into account. Every manager must constantly reflect on himself and his behaviour and constantly improve his communication skills. Only in this way he can motivate employees in the long term to acquire knowledge independently, to organize knowledge and to make knowledge available to the company.

Especially the implementation of the knowledge management tools described below, needs an outstanding personality. The employees need to feel that knowledge management is important to the leaders, only then they will follow and the new knowledge management will be a success.

Leaders should keep in mind that they also benefit tremendously from a good knowledge management. Motivated employees, who know what to do and who are capable of improving their knowledge independently are a great asset for a leader. The leader can be sure that the team is performing outstandingly and that his workload shrinks significantly.

Why should I think about Knowledge Management?

The knowledge of the individual human being is called **individual knowledge** and it stands in contrast to **organizational knowledge**, which is for example the knowledge of your company. However, individual knowledge often results in a problem for a company. For example when an experienced and knowledgeable employee or the owner-manager himself leaves the company. In such a case, a large part of the knowledge important to the company is often lost. For this reason individual knowledge should be turned into organizational knowledge. This Q&A will guide you to a better knowledge management in your company.

What does a knowledge manager do?

The **knowledge manager** has the task of ensuring that a knowledge management strategy and knowledge management processes are further developed and improved. His main tasks are to advise, communicate and think ahead to the management and the knowledge management initiatives. He is also responsible for the contents of the knowledge database.

Who should be my knowledge manager?

You should appoint a qualified and esteemed senior employee or the owner-manager himself as knowledge manager. It is important that the knowledge manager has a good foresight referring to technological developments, the company's vision and the company's structures. He should have a good standing in the workforce and an overview of the employees.

What kind of CRM system should I use?

You should use an advanced customer relationship management (CRM) tool that stores your customers data. It is helpful to define a customer oriented strategy in your company. It also helps to identify the needs of your clients by saving all information you acquire about them. It also protects you against information loss in the case an employee or the owner-manager leaves the company, as all contacts are saved in a central database. It also boosts your efficiency by allowing you to automatize several processes, like sending out reminders to your clients, remembering your employees to contact your clients frequently and keeping track of communication.

Should I use pictures or picture series to visually?

The presentation of processes and instructions via graphical illustrations facilitates your workers understanding, by showing errors and deviations vividly. The employees also have time to memorize

each step or condition and to look at it repeatedly. It has also proven itself in practice to look at the pictures together, to talk about them and to discuss them. This dialogue about what is seen promotes mental absorption.

- No limits for your creativity. Use pictures, comics, illustrations or graphics.
- Folders are a good choice for collections of picture series.
- Pay attention to good image quality and if necessary hire a professional photographer or illustrator, the investment is worthwhile.

What about films?

Not all employees like to read or are sufficiently proficient in the local language. Furthermore, instructions and guidelines are often bureaucratically and technically difficult to understand. That's why filming is a good option.

- Record expert interviews of the owner-manager or experienced colleagues about important topics and processes.
- Work structurally with the owner-manager to cover all important aspects in each video.
- Create an easy and safe access to the videos for the employees, e.g. use the companies intranet.

What can I do if I work with a lot of different materials and produce various products?

You can plastically support work instructions, as images or films often do not provide enough meaningful details and employees cannot make informed decisions, only based on pictures and films. Haptic originals such as fabrics, materials, surfaces, patterns and colours are very important. You can use the following techniques:

- Create a collection of: produced products, used materials, developed techniques, supplier samples and/or mixtures tested.
- Place the collections at accessible and reasonable places.
- Design the collections appealingly and encourage employees to further carry on the creation of these collections.

How can I better train new employees and make sure they overtake knowledge from older employees?

In this case a mentoring program will be the optimal solution. A mentoring program is a program, where older and/or more experienced workers (mentors) train the younger and/or less experienced workers (mentees). Each mentee gets a mentor assigned, who will guide him for a defined timeframe. Mentoring programs are a good way to pass on knowledge to colleagues and successors and at the same time to motivate experienced employees.

- Use mentoring programs to accelerate the learning curve of new employees. Mentoring is a good motivator for younger **and** older employees. It also promotes a more pleasant work environment.
- Define clear guidelines for the mentoring program. This includes goals, time frame, locations, meeting points, communication channels, the individual expectations of mentor and mentee, and the limits of the mentoring program.
- Especially owner-managers can participate in mentoring programs. A possible realization of this approach is an excessive training of the potential successor or key employees, before the owner-manager leaves the company.

I have some workers with expert knowledge do I include them as well?

As you have some workers with special expert knowledge it is important to include these experts in the mentoring program. When these experts train other works you make sure that the expert

knowledge is widely spread within your company. In case an expert leaves the company, is on vacation or sick for a long time you can easily assign the expert’s tasks to another worker who has also good knowledge in the area, as he was trained by the expert.

Which is the best tool to assess and improve my workers skills?

If you feel like some of your workers lack training and need to improve their skills, a good way to structure, evaluate and visualize the skills and competences is a competence matrix. It gives you a good overview of the existing skills and an indication for improvement.

In case a worker leaves the company for a longer time, due to vacations, sickness, parental leave or other circumstances the competence matrix helps you to identify experts/substitutes in your company. It also shows you which competences are missing in your company. With the help of a competence matrix you can better distribute skills and your company becomes more flexible. When hiring new workers you can define better the skill requirements for an open position.

How does it work? First you need to identify the competences. Here a brainstorming session can be a good tool. Then you sort the competences into categories. Finally you match each employee with his competences. Example:

	Workshop			Computer (basic)			Computer (advanced)		
	Welding	Grinding	Drawing	PowerPoint	Excel	Word	VBA	C++	Java
Jakob	0	0	++	+++	+	++	0	0	0
Julia	+++	++	++	0	+++	+	++	0	0
Jan	0	0	+	+	++	+++	+	++	+++

Our recommendation is to have at least 2 workers with each competence in the company.

How can I improve my workers effectiveness when searching for knowledge?

To improve the effectiveness of your workers search for knowledge you can create a knowledge market. This is a tool that facilitates the exchange of knowledge between the workers who need the knowledge and the workers that have the knowledge.

This makes knowledge accessible for all, improves the efficiency and reduces the time your workers need to search/acquire new knowledge. Consequently it improves your problem solve capabilities as an organization and you become more independent from external knowledge sources.

Two types of knowledge market platforms exist:

- 1) Virtual Platform: This virtual platform can have many different shapes. You can use a specialized knowledge market platform or you can use your intranet. Sometimes even a shared word document is sufficient.
- 2) Physical Platform: The second option, the physical platform builds up on the physical presence of your workers and eventually external stakeholders, like professors, consultants, suppliers or customers. You can organize a conference, a simple meeting or stands on a fair. You need to define the topic in advance.

One example of how to organize a knowledge market is the following:

Invite all workers from one department or the whole company into a meeting room. Then you put two boards into the room. One board has the headline “offer” the other board has the headline “demand”. Now every employee gets some pieces of paper and writes his demand an supply of knowledge on the paper and puts his name on the bottom of the paper. After all the pieces of paper are on the board, the instructor connects supply and demand of knowledge and encourages connection.

You need to set clear rules: Focus the participants attention on a common interest or greater goal and encourage the workers to formulate precisely and explicit.

How can I stay informed about new industry developments?

You can use the tool Business Intelligence to help you to stay informed. It is a tool that helps you to capture, analyse and spread all essential information. It also monitors your environment.

The tool works with a 4 step approach:

- 1) Think about what you want to search for and analyse the benefits of that information. Keep in mind your limited resources of time and money.
- 2) Define information needs in your company and where you can look for information. List the sources of information you already have.
- 3) Plan, how, when, how often and who of your employees will capture information and how it will be distributed in your company.
- 4) Validate the implementation and evaluate the performance

Consider all potential sources and then select the most interesting ones (databases, internet, competitors website, fairs, conferences). Then filter the information for the most important ones and only keep this information.

How can I increase my sales and beat my competition?

If you are struggling with decreasing sales, an intense competition that is ahead and you feel not innovative enough an idea competition is a great tool to solve your problems. Its basic idea is that people can submit their new ideas, one or more ideas win and the winning idea gets a reward. New ideas can come from employees, clients or suppliers, so engage all of them! It works in a 8-step process:

- 1) Consultation with experts to design the competition
- 2) Selection of judges
- 3) Name an instructor that organizes the competition
- 4) Define the duration and the price of the competition
- 5) Set rules, elaborate the structure and define criteria
- 6) Announce the idea competition to all potential partners
- 7) The judges evaluate the ideas and decide on a winner, based on the defined criteria
- 8) Organize and conduct a ceremony for all participants and the winner

Before the challenge you need to make sure that all the participants understand the necessities of the customer, for whom they will create the ideas. A clear goal must be set and a good and respected manager should be the instructor. This shows the importance of the idea competition for you.

How can I help my employees to learn?

Here the tool “Lessons Learned” can help you. The tool is based on documentation of knowledge, that takes place shortly after new an activity generated new knowledge. The people involved can compare what was expected and what was the result of the activity. This helps to determine better determine if an activity was successful or not. Ultimately the knowledge is kept in your company.

This tool also promotes self-reflection of your workers after each activity. It shows what was good, what was bad and what needs to be improved. Your processes become more effective, use less resources and less time. This results in a reduction of costs.

You can also involve other employees for additional input. The overall process should include these points:

- 1) Meeting with all team members and inform them about “Lessons Learned”
- 2) Implement a “Lessons Learned” meeting after each project or critical event
- 3) Assign an instructor, who is not the project leader, as he tends to dominate the communication.

Lessons Learned is not one evaluation, it is a consistent process of learning.

How can I combat demotivation?

The reason for unmotivated workers, or workers that don't do what they should is often a lack of proper internal communication.

It is recommended for the owner-manager to clearly and continuously promote the company's strategy. A better internal communication focuses on the employees and improves the communication channels, the communication quality and the communication strategy.

The advantages of better internal communication are a better understanding of the shares values. It is easier to communicate behaviours, habits and feelings to promote a sense of belonging and to increase motivation.

There are points you need to keep in mind if you want to promote better internal communication:

- First find out the worker's needs, use an anonymous survey for example
- Introduce breakfasts for the workers with random seat orders, so the workers talk to different colleagues from different areas each time. Directors report on current business situation, projects, personal changes, internal and external problems and expectations for the future.
- Make sure that this information is accessible for all employees and closely listen to their opinions.

Further tips:

- It is important that the owner-manager shows commitment and interest
- Focus on the quality of communication
- Listen actively
- Use technology to improve the internal communication
- Don't assume that verbal communication is easily implemented, just because your company is small. Workers need a structure and parameters to communicate without fear of consequences.

Useful Links:

- The 5 Best Free Knowledge Management Software Options
<https://blog.capterra.com/5-free-knowledge-management-software-solutions/>
- Comprehensive overview of knowledge management tools and processes incl. videos
<http://www.knowledge-management-tools.net/knowledge-conversion.php>
- The Challenge of Knowledge Management in Small and Medium Enterprises – Andronikou (2018)
<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/0eee/39ab137ed80bb34f96b90c984da95b489f56.pdf>
- Practical knowledge management guide incl. best practice examples
https://www.apo-tokyo.org/00e-books/IS-44_Practical-KM-Guide-for-SME-OwnerManager/IS-44_Practical-KM-Guide-for-SME-OwnerManager.pdf
- Free online course explaining some great knowledge management tools
<https://www.udemy.com/course/knowledge-management-tools-for-smes/>