

Sensible Learning

The post-industrial era or ‘new paradigm’ of organizations that began to take form in the 1990s offered a vision of flatter, more flexible workplaces requiring different kinds of skills and knowledge capacities of workers. Organizations faced more dynamic and challenging environments that require different kinds of talent – the need to hire knowledgeable and innovative individuals who would also demand more meaningful work assignments and greater autonomy in their execution. While critics argue over the degree to which the resulting workplaces have truly been reinvented, a recent *Business Week* article noted how many organizations are seeking to ‘revamp their managerial ranks and hire ... people who are comfortable with complexity and uncertainty’ (Woyke & Atal, 2007).

This suggests the emergence of a new generation of creative managers that comes prepared with an understanding of design thinking ‘with its emphasis on maximizing possibilities rather than managing for efficiency’ (Woyke & Atal, 2007). Creative managers embrace the notion of ‘aesthetic,’ described by Gagliardi (1996, p. 566) as ‘all types of sense experience and not simply to experience what is socially described as beauty or defined as art.’ Incorporating aesthetic experiences in the learning process thereby activates students’ sensory perception, heightening their awareness beyond merely the rational or cognitive. Referring to the interaction between a work of art and its perceiver, Dewey (1934) contended that all aesthetic experiences are educational because they invoke an active, reciprocal interaction rather than a passive stance. Creative managers, then, play an increasingly vital role in addressing the emerging and demanding global context in which organizations will have to compete in the coming decades.

In this context, our paper addresses two related questions: 1) What kind of learning experiences enhance the development of creative managers?; and 2) What are the implications that these creative managers present for the prospects of organizational learning and knowledge management?

Creative Managers as *Sensible* Learners

According to Webster (1963), ‘sensible’ has several interpretations. Three that are relevant to our understandings include: capable of being perceived by the senses; emotional awareness; and containing reason or understanding. Multi-sensory exploration, when coupled with emotional awareness, creates a necessary balance to the narrowing of opportunity sets and restrictions of knowledge flow created by environmental and performance pressures. How does this occur? ‘Sensible’ management learning experiences are aesthetically compelling, emotionally intense, cross-disciplinary, and politically real. Aesthetic learning experiences are important because they are active, emphasize tacit knowledge, and are one of the ways in which we learn judgment. As students learn to see (feel, hear) whether their work meets expected standards, their learning is characterized by greater dimensionality and intentionality. Students become ‘more open minded, risk taking, intellectually responsible, and emotionally committed to their work’ (Welsh, Dehler & Murray, 2008). Dewey (1934) held that emotion is the ‘cementing force’ connecting

current experience with prior knowledge in the learning process. Similarly, John-Steiner (2000) notes that felt emotion is the connecting force necessary for creative collaboration.

Thus, the emotional awareness evoked by sensible learning experiences is crucial as it creates both intellectual continuity and the quality of mutuality in collaborative experiences. Cross-disciplinary experiences build translators who learn this skill through negotiating disciplinary boundaries, appropriating new ideas and methods, and assimilating or incorporating these ideas and methods into the 'home' discipline. Contact at the margins or overlap of disciplines, by exposing knowledge differences, gets knowledge flowing allowing students to 'try on' new and different schemas. The appropriation and incorporation processes are inherently political. Analogies between disciplinary power and functional power are easy to draw. Sensible learning promotes disciplinary clarity, effective cross-disciplinary communication, and the utilization of a variety of knowledge bases to either solve problems or advance knowledge. Managers with these learning experiences can exercise judgment, demonstrate intellectual continuity and flexibility, engage others with mutuality, and negotiate meaning within a political system.

Implications for Organizational Learning and Knowledge

Knowledge sharing is problematic for firms as there are barriers or disincentives to sharing knowledge. Previous research (e.g., Szulanski, 1996) has indicated that overcoming self-interest to share valuable knowledge with others, or guaranteeing that all involved share their knowledge, or developing managerial routines that foster effective and efficient knowledge sharing represent dilemmas for firms.

Sensible learners represent a clear benefit to firms, whose day-to-day reality doesn't allow them to engage in a multi-sensory exploration. Sensible learning processes help overcome the many behavioral, cognitive, structural, and political barriers to effectively leveraging relevant knowledge within firms. Sensible learners can surface and reconcile dissimilarities when encountering new, ambiguous domains. They have developed norms that support reciprocal knowledge sharing and the ability to accommodate new frames, experiences and individuals. Sensible learners possess communicative competence. They are skilled at establishing shared representations (shared systems of meaning) and possess greater familiarity with a variety of systems (through the cross-disciplinary relationships). They have the motivation to seek and share knowledge, create trust relationships and harness power relationships to enact new resource combinations.

Implications for OLKC

The intent of this paper is to explore the notion of *sensible learning* through the mechanism of the creative manager, extending its implications into the realm of organizational learning and knowledge management processes. Building on earlier work on aesthetic experience (Gagliardi, 1996; Welsh, Dehler & Murray, 2008), we will invoke political, emotional, aesthetic, and multi-sensory processes found in the messiness of the organizational milieu. Further, this exploration will adopt a critical perspective in relation to the 'new paradigm' of organizations (e.g., Dehler, Welsh & Lewis, 2001), challenging the capacity of organizations to incorporate sensory processes that do not conform to traditional rationalistic, positivist perspectives. This could, for

instance, open seldom addressed issues related to ontology – critical realism as one possibility (e.g., Welsh & Dehler, 2007).

Keywords

aesthetics; emotion; politics; creative manager; sensibility

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