INNOVATION ON THE CREST

-the power of changing knowledge domains

by

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Abstract

This paper addresses how power and politics influence learning, knowledge and innovation, investigating the power of changing knowledge domains, which is not sufficiently investigated. Our data was conducted in a Bank Alliance (TBA) implementing a new knowledge vision, involving both product- and process innovation. We find that finance advisers´ lack of sensemaking of their new role as sellers is crucial, as TBA creates a discrepancy between sensegiving and sensemaking of their knowledge vision. Hence, we believe that changing knowledge domains involves enacting power, as both a bottom-up activity for finance adviser and top-down activity for management, as highly political acts of all involved parties.

Keywords: innovation, knowledge, power, politics, learning

Introduction

The Bank Industry is believed to enforce change and innovation to enhance competitive advantages, as a result of constantly meeting new technological, political and economic demands within the business. However, continuously changing practices to enable innovation, requires learning, knowledge sharing, knowledge requests and knowledge transfer across and within social practices (Swan et al., 2002), as learning and knowledge are integrated in innovation (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; von Krogh et al., 2000; Newell et al., 2009). Hence, to investigate innovation means accounting for substantial change in knowledge domains, acknowledging that innovation assume knowledge to be translated into new knowledge domains, where established practice is to change accordingly. Consequently, innovations are argued to require both disorganizing and reorganizing knowledge domains (Weick and Westley 1996), where the optimal learning point is when order and disorder is juxtaposted, on the crest (Clegg et al. 2005).

Our aim is investigating the power of changing knowledge domains, recognizing the importance of connecting distributed knowledge across and within regions, districts, networks, teams and local practices to enable innovation in a Norwegian Bank Alliance. Our main concern is how power and politics influence the change of knowledge domain for innovation, as knowledge and innovation involves power over and access to existing knowledge domains and resistance towards new knowledge domains (Swan et al., 2002). However, power and politics are not sufficiently addressed and even ignored in the learning, knowledge and innovation literature (Anatonacopoulou, 2006; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008; Lawrence et al., 2005). Hence, our goal is filling the "power and politics gap", accounting for power and politics in innovations is therefore necessary to explore differences in interests, resistance, possible conflicts, powerful key actors, knowledge sharing and knowledge flow, as a question of who gets access to what knowledge and why. Accordingly, we approach learning, knowledge and innovations as integrated complex processes embedded in social practice, acknowledging that these processes are political acts and structures (Lawrence et al., 2005; Contu and Willmott, 2003) and influenced by power (Blackler, 2000; Mørk et al., 2010)

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, we explore established literature within organizational learning and knowledge, addressing power and politics and investigate possibilities of how to approach power and politics, emphasizing why these processes must gain sufficient attention. Second, we investigate the implementation of a new knowledge vision among finance advisers in a Bank Alliance, aiming at changing their knowledge domains. Hence, we contribute with filling the gap of power and politics in the organizational learning and knowledge literature and adding empirical work to address this gap as vital for innovative work.

The following sections are organized as follows. We start with a literature review on power and politics in the organizational learning, knowledge and innovation literature. We then outline our approach to learning, knowledge and innovation and how to apply these approaches methodologically in own case studies of finance advisers in the Bank Alliance. Our results and findings are presented and discussed in accordance to how and why power and politics effects learning and knowing and whether these political acts are fruitful in explaining why some innovations succeed and others do not. This paper conclude with some conceptual implications and suggestions for future research.

Power and politics in knowledge and innovations

To understand learning, knowledge and innovation means accounting for power and politics (Brown and Duguid, 2001), as knowledge involves survival, control and authority among colleagues in the organization (Schneider, 2007) where power becomes an active, resistive or reactive force, largely internalized in how colleagues interact and get access (or not) to each other (Fox, 2000). However, the organizational learning and knowledge literature remains incomplete and suffer from not sufficiently addressing power and politics (Anatonacopoulou, 2006; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008; Lawrence et al., 2005). Also, the literature is accused of ignoring that change or innovation cannot be achieved without political struggles and relations invested in power (Foucault, 1997; Fox, 2000).

Knowledge is often contested by professionals to gain and maintain control over particular knowledge domains (Swan et al., 2002). That means that new knowledge might fail to be translated into new practice because it does not align well or it threatens existing boundaries that empower some employees over others (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002; Newell et al., 2009; Robertson, 2007), Consequently, since change involves power in location and incorporation of new knowledge (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008), where power structures typically are embedded in established practice (Maurice and Sorge, 2000), the result can either resistant or encouragement of innovation, or a combination of both.

Still, the organizational learning and knowledge literature overemphasis mutuality, coherence and harmony (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2001; Gherardi, 2009), ignoring discontinuity, conflicts, power and control (Contu and Willmott et al., 2003), with few critical approach to learning discourses and its pervasive content which determines learning and knowledge as "good for all" (Contu et al., 2003). The consequences are that the literature allows power and politics to be treated narrowly and negatively (Newell et al., 2009) and that political processes continue to be neglected and under-theorized (Hardy et al., 2003).

Our approaches

So far power and politics is given concurrent processing. Simplified, however, power can be defined as a force that effects outcome while politics is power in action (Hardy, 1996). Politics can be defined by referring to both the social force of influence, as well the strategic processes that arise, deploy or employ to maintain, avoid or challenge power relations (Vince, 2004:66). Important is to acknowledge power as only manifested through its use, as power is local, within situ, rather then transcendent and not a possession to wield over others (Foucault, 1997). We believe to differ between dimensions of power is important, where Hardy (2004) provides a fruitful contribution when talking about respectively resource power, process power and meaning power. *Resource power* is to influence decision outcomes and bring about desired behaviour through the development of key resources in which others depend. *Process power* involves power resides in organizational decision-making processes which incorporate a variety of procedures and political routines. *Meaning power* operates through the semantic aspects of the organizational life, involving the legitimation or de-legitimation of particular activities. Meaning power gives associations to sensemaking and sensegiving. Sensemaking can be understood as meaning construction by employees to develop a framework that enables an understanding of experiences and the organizations reality (Weick, 1995; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Voronov, 2008). However, sensegiving is when for instance leaders facilitate processes to attempt to influence sensemaking and meaning constructions towards the sensegivers´ visions, underlying values and actual change (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). That means that sensegiving can play a role in shaping or reshaping employees identities. Sensegiving is therefore bound up with power as it normalizes organizational reality or shut down alternative interpretations (Voronov, 2008).

In our analysis we investigate power and politics in innovation according to a relational view (Fox, 2000; Swan and Scarbrough, 2005), where learning and knowing represent social processes and practices of both continuity/stability and change/innovation (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000), and where power and politics is acknowledge through its use (Foucault, 1997). Consequently, these processes are characterized by its embeddedness and situatedness (Antonacopoulou, 2006), meaning that knowledge is a context bound phenomena, socially embedded in practice as processes of knowing and acting (Blackler, 1995; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002), and learning and knowing is integrated through participation (Gherardi, 2006; Blackler, 2004; Tsoukas, 2005; Elkjaer, 2003). Hence, we approach learning, knowing and innovations as intertwined, dynamic, processual, and practice based (Blackler, 2004; Tsoukas, 2005; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000; Newell et al., 2009), involving power and politics (Contu and Willmott, 2003). To sufficiently address power and politics we use Hardy´s (2004) three power dimensions, respectively resource power, process power and meaning power and politics are addressed in accordance to sensemaking and sensegiving activities (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Rouleau, 2005).

Research design

The study was conducted in a Norwegian bank and finance alliance. The bank alliance (TBA) is a network organization, organized in five major regions in Norway, respectively TBA North, TBA West, TBA Central, TBA South-East and TBA East. The alliance was established in 1996 which included the North, West, Central and South East regions. The East region became a member of the alliance in 2006. TBA co-operate through joint ownership of the holding company TBA Group, where each region holds a 20 percent ownership in TBA Group. TBA consists of approximately 350 local banks and 5500 employees, geographically covering Norway. TBA Group is a catalyst and an initiator for alliances and co-operations within TBA, but also responsible for financial corporation that produces off-balance products for distribution through the network of 350 local banks in Norway. Hence, TBA Group consist of corporative management and business and stab functions within savings, insurance, payments, technology, e-commerce, market communication, finance, economy, strategy, information and bank co-operations. Strategies, visions and goals are decided in co-operation with TBA as owners of the TBA Group, where TBA Group serves as the superior head office and business unit for TBA.

In 2007, TBA Group developed a new knowledge vision, formulated as follows: "*TBA should appear as an attractive and learning organization with employees that have the capability of transforming and developing knowledge, skills and attitudes into behaviour, and thus, appear as skilled and business oriented towards customers"*. The intention and goal with the new knowledge vision is twofold. First, it is to increase finance advisers´ knowledge on their four business domains, does being respectively 1. loans, 2. savings and financial placements, 3. money transmissions and 4. insurance. Second, to change attitudes and work behaviour in accordance to a sales organization with finance advisers increasing their focus on sales within the four business domains.

We conducted our studies in 2008/2009. The Knowledge Director (KD) in TBA Group was the originator and an important information source.We were also part of the Knowledge Network, lead by the KD with one or to representatives within HRM and Knowledge Management from each region. In the Knowledge Network, we participated in five meetings and interviewed one representative from each region, a total of five interviews. We also conducted 30 interviews with finance advisers on the private marked, representing all five regions, but mostly representatives from TBA Central, TBA South and TBA North-East, adding one focus group with a local bank in TBA East. All interviews were conducted in the respectively local bank´ facilities. All data from interviews, focus group, informal meetings, conversations and observations were transcribed and Nvivo were used to categorize and analyze the data.

TBA Group has provided learning courses and learning tools and supported learning and knowledge sharing throughout the network. Implementing a new knowledge vision, with a superior goal of being "*an attractive and learning organization where employees have the capability of transforming and developing knowledge, skills and attitudes into behaviour, and thus, appear as skilled and business oriented towards customers"* is to achieve their goal of knowledge being their competitive advantage. This knowledge vision is in accordance TBA dependent upon their capacity to learning and be innovative within their four business domains. Also, the knowledge vision is in accordance to TBA changing from a traditional bank to a sales organizations.

Several finance advisers have 20 to 30 years of experience from the bank profession. They started off their career within savings and loans, whereas today they are sellers within all four business domains at TBA. Also, they are now expected to sell and be more proactive towards customers instead of customers coming to them, as have been the case up until now.

Our results and findings are presented along three main priorities within innovative work: 1) New knowledge visions, 2) New product portfolio and 3) New role as finance adviser. These main priorities are analyzed and discussed in accordance to how power (resource-, process- and meaning power) and politics (sensemaking and sensegiving activities) are enacted, investigating the power of changing knowledge domains.

Results and Discussions

We believe that TBA´s new knowledge vision involves both product- and process innovation. Implementing their new knowledge vision relies heavily on 1. product innovation, as each finance adviser must change and obtain new knowledge on all four business domains and 2. process innovation in new role behaviour of finance advisers expecting to be "sellers". Accordingly, three main priorities can be identified:

1. New knowledge vision focusing on TBA as a knowledge intensive organization with a continuing focus on learning and knowledge development to transform knowledge, skills and attitudes into knowledgeable behaviour towards customers.
2. New products portfolio were all finance advisers must obtain necessary knowledge on all four business domains.
3. New role as finance adviser becomes "sellers".

New knowledge vision

The finance advisers´ feel a continuing pressure to be updated on knowledge. Hence, focus is on their ability to learn and develop new knowledge. The lack of a common understanding of how to implement their knowledge vision and making sense of its consequences for established practice, results in some frustration. They do not really know what is expected of them in terms of knowledge goals. They explain:

> No, we do not have any other goals then what the Bank tells us. And in a way it looks like we just are to complete all product tests in our electronic learning tool and thus get authorized. And that we continue to be authorized. There are no clearer knowledge goals than that. So, how to create individual solutions and facilitations in customer meetings, because some needs that more than others, that remains unanswered.

> We do not have any other goals then the bank says that we have. We are certified as finance advisers and must continue to be so without having the opportunity to influence on own goals.

> We are not involved in the budget process we are just given "the order" from TBA Central… We believe that is beyond reason….we have tried to do something about that for many years, without succeeding… Those that decide upon goals, we only meet once a year.

Obviously, power is recognized as political acts by TBA, dictating finance advisers goals as a top-down force, characterized as process power (Hardy, 2004). The finance advisers are not involved in decision processes and feel empowered by the redefinitions on some knowledge being superior (Newell et al., 2006; Gherardi and Nicolini et al., 2002). Therefore, their new knowledge vision with "employees having the capacity to "*transform and develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes into skilled behaviour towards customers*", moreover culminate as a question of knowledge on financial products and not how to sell and act towards customers, they report. Their experience is also that knowledge goals exclusively count the number of sales. They explain:

> I find that the focus is just on how to sell more. But to sell more we need to know more. So I feel that beginning with sale is beginning a bit in the wrong end…Little of what we do is good enough. We always hear that we need to sell more, even when we sell in accordance to our budget, it is still not good enough

> We are not measured in relation to our knowledge. We are just measured by sales… I think we should have other goals then just being measured after our number of sales..We should for instance be measured as a group, I think that would be a good idea. We rely heavily upon each other, so why shouldn't we create the results together too.

> Our budget numbers are just dictated us, we should participate in setting up own budget. We are also measured all the time, how many meetings we have had today, have many cases. But if you have less cases one month, you have probably solved other tasks. You should have acceptance for that.

Lawrence et al. (2003) argue that lack of balance between systemic power and episodic power (Faucalt, 1997), will result in failing to manage both exploitation and exploration of knowledge, a balance that is crucial of innovation (March, 1991). Systemic power is diffused through the social system that constitutes organizations, through routines and ongoing practice, while episodic power is discrete political acts initiated by self-interested actors. Episodic power is needed for exploration of new knowledge while weak systemic power gives poorly exploitation of existing knowledge (Lawrence et al., 2003). Accordingly, we find that TBAs use of episodic power fails as the systemic power fail in exploitation of knowledge. New knowledge are dictated, without acknowledging the importance of exploiting existing knowledge, for instance finance advisers previous knowledge and experience. Nor creating necessary balance, create unnecessary confusion on how to perform and what knowledge that is required. Accordingly, Easterby-Smith et al. (2008) conclude that systemic political factors influence what external information that are accessible, and who that have legitimate authority to make us of it. Episodic power is important when new forms of external information were available and episodic power was key component in internal processes leading to adaptation and utilization of external knowledge.

We believe that finance advisers refer to TBAs knowledge vision and superior goals more as a distant force than anchored in own practice and individual goals. Instead, they rely on own solutions, creating their own practice, informally bounding with colleagues and relying on own experiences in serving customers. They definitely prefer to learn through shared practice with colleague. They find these learning activities more valuable then courses and authorization tests. At the same time, they enjoy working individually, finding solutions for their customers and practising budgeting and accounting. Also, they want leaders that facilitate and enable more knowledge sharing among colleagues, leaders that take more responsibility of anchoring knowledge goals and visions through learning in local practices. Hence, their use of power is recognized as an active and resistive force (Fox, 2000), as bottom-up and a social force on how to implement their knowledge vision and in doing so, how they challenge power relations (Vince, 2004), negotiating own positions and find "allies" on how to change practice accordingly.

The power of changing knowledge domains

Implementing the new product portfolio with one finance adviser serving all four business domains is experienced as problematic. They are concern about the time pressure, and not being able to support necessary customer care. Moreover, they explain that they sell financial safety, and are afraid of making mistakes. For instance within insurance and placements in stocks and funds, mistakes can be crucial. Consequently, they find that they are moving in the wrong direction, creating more distance to their customers. One explains:

> I am used to work from a-x, so at the beginning I was a bit uncomfortable. I don't have control over the whole process anymore. No I grant the loan, but don't know when the customer gets the papers, and if they call I am not to say were in the process the loan is. But I have to trust others to do their job properly. You have to. I am suppose to sell products, while others take care of following up my sales.

We find some resistance towards the product innovation. However, their resistance is higher towards the process innovation, threatening established practice and changing their knowledge domains on how they work, then the product innovation, obtaining new product knowledge. Product innovation tend to converge around the product itself, while process innovation are largely intangible, tacit and context-depended and thus, more complicated (Newell et al., 2009), also since changing knowledge domains is highly political (Hardy, 2004). Also, we believe finance advisers suffer from not making sense of their new role as finance adviser. Some of them explain:

> They could have been more selective on what they send us when we need to be updated, both on insurance, placements, loans, etc. It is too much, and you cannot learn it all and obtain necessary knowledge on how to sell four so different financial products.

> It is too much after they decided that we should have all four main financial areas. Rather, we should specialize. Then you could get it done properly. No you feel more or less uncertain on

> everything. I feel that. I am afraid not giving my customers all the information that is required.

> We should specialize. I think that will be forced forth because it is so demanding to have necessary knowledge in all areas. I don´t think that any of us master that. The quality is too poor. I think we will end up with more specialization.

We find informal variations on how to meet these challenges, as battles of conflicts between process power, meaning power and resource power (Hardy, 2004). These modes of power bring renegotiations to the centre of processes of establishing, changing and maintaining practices (Mørk et al. 2010), all being crucial for innovation (Swan and Scarbrough, 2005), and were resource power involve how finance advisers uses their power on how to influence the implementation of the knowledge vision, incorporating new knowledge goals in redefining and changing established practice or not.

New practices might be competence destroying (Christensen et al., 2000), which we believe is how finance advisers make sense of the new product portfolio. They believe it will threaten established relations on customer service, as it does not align well with existing practice (Newell et al., 2009; Robertson, 2007). Consequently, they have organized for one colleague at each local bank serving as a resource within one of the four business domains, coordinating and obtaining necessary knowledge and serving as a knowledge source for their colleagues within for instance insurance. Also, we find that at some offices, they are not serving all four knowledge domains. On the contrary, their customers are served by several finance advisers depending on what kind of financial product that is relevant. Consequently, they have created own local practices on how to perform as finance advisers, not being in accordance to TBAs knowledge vision. That implies using resource power in accordance to their sensemaking of the knowledge vision. We therefore recognize them creating meaning of the knowledge vision and changing practice in accordance to their sensemaking and not in accordance to sensegiving from the TBA on how to interpret the knowledge vision. Hence, we find a discrepancy between sensegiving, where TBA management attempt to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction with preferred redefinition of how to perform as finance advisers, and sensemaking of the finance advisers not taking necessary actions to reshape and perform in accordance to the sensegiving requirements and underlying values (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). Sensegiving is bound up with power, as it constrains sensemaking and shuts down alterative interpretations of for instance knowledge visions (Huzzard, 2004; Rouleau, 2005). However, we also believe that sensemaking is a way of enacting resource power as a political act on how finance advisers choose to implement the knowledge vision, heavily influencing the characteristics of a new practice and how they change existing knowledge domains in accordance to their sensemaking. This is related both to they work in accordance to the new product portfolio, but even more conspicuous in their implementation of the new role as sellers.

Sale budgets and proactivity towards potential customers represent innovation on how finance advisers are expected to work. We find substantial resistance towards changing practice according to new knowledge domains and the consequences for what a finance adviser are expected to be and how to perform their new role of a finance adviser. They urge to create a feeling of security in giving correct advice to their customers. However, time pressure is a challenge. Also, learning through practice and experience is not prioritized in the same way as authorization test and courses by TBA. Mostly, their greatest challenge is to create the optimal customer conversation and thus, create good financial solutions for their customers. Obviously, customer service is important to them. Consequently, they prefer to talk about selling, but rather customer relations, satisfaction and commitment to the bank. They explain:

> We are use to the word seller being related to car sellers or vacuum cleaner sellers. We have to work on changing our attitudes against our interpretation of the term. When you sell bank products, it is not so much a concrete product, it is more abstract. You sell security.
>
> I don´t look at my self as a seller. Raw selling, that is just not me. I can sell a product, but is it the right one? For the customer? I always think about the customer when I sell. I never sell a product that customers do not need.

To create meaning of their new role as sellers, they find that competent behaviour and creating necessary knowing on how to apply their knowledge in customers meetings requires that they learn through practice. They find learning through practice fruitful, enabling them to share knowledge and experiences with colleagues. They explain:

> We need more input on what they call the good customer conversation. Sometimes I work very hard with some customers, not being able to sell. Then I need more input. Maybe input to learn to be tough towards the customer. We suppose to sell, that is what we are suppose to do. We are not advisers anymore, we are sellers. So we need more input on that. Because the more often you hear about how to perform, the more secure you feel.
>
> It is very important to create the good customer conversation. You need to feel in control, in order to get necessary information from customers to create good solutions for them... We know that there is a need for discussing cases, also cases of doubt. We do things differently. Perhaps we should have been more coordinated, and shared experience and be able to discuss cases. We have talked about this, about discussing cases in the morning, but haven't really come to it yet.
>
> I find that there is more knowledge sharing when we discuss cases. For instance that we still can participate together in customers meetings. To grasp new experiences and get some new input. Instead of being stuck in your own solutions. Not that they are neither right nor wrong, but getting input, other approaches. We should be able to do that more often.
>
> It is crucial to learn other approaches and perspectives…many of us have been here for around 25 years and we do not have any newcomers. We have the quality and competence but what about the next level? Short seminar twice a year is to limited time ..We help ach other and after customer meetings we talk about products but not the sale. So we do not exchange knowledge on why did´t we say that our how could we presented the products better.

We find that they learn through practice to develop necessary knowledge about financial products and customer service. That means that power and politics is enacted in these processes (Carlie, 2002). Basically they report having done their job in relation to what customers expect, but their interpretation of what the customer expect, heavily rely upon their sensemaking of exploitation of existing practice and meaning construction when exploring their new knowledge vision. Hence, we find that expected innovation from TBA, with consequences of fundamentally changing their knowledge domains, moreover culminate as adjustment of established practice then fully implementing their knowledge visions with necessary consequences of product- and process innovation (Van de Ven et al., 1999). We believe that enabling innovation, strongly relate to how power and politics are enacted in TBA. Their decision on a new knowledge vision is fuelled by process power, not involving finance advisers in deciding own knowledge goals. Also, what we believe is crucial, is the finance advisers´ lack of sensemaking of their new role as sellers. Without considering negative attitudes towards possible interpretation of the concept, TBA fails in the sensegiving activities and in their use of meaning power. Instead, finance advisers experience empowerment, not creating necessary meaning on how to perform as finance advisers. Hence, the consequences being that they enact resource power as their only possibility of making sense of how to perform, relying on previous experience Still, we find that they are becoming more knowledgeable as finance advisers, but not successfully implementing innovation and the new knowledge vision. Instead, the finance advisers more or less work in accordance to own practice, finding individual solutions and collective performances in cooperation with their colleagues at each local Bank, enacting resource power on how to implement innovation. That means access and exploiting existing knowledge and serving and advising customers in accordance to their sense making of how to perform as finance adviser, hence, being quite resistance to exploration of new knowledge. Hence, their resistance moreover lies in the discrepancy between sensegiving and sensemaking as key to understand unsuccessful or the absent of innovation in TBA.

Some concluding remarks

Adressing the “power and politics gap” in the organizational learning, knowledge and innovation literature, it is obvious that more empirical work is needed to further address these issues and also to develop more conceptual work. We would argue that without addressing power and politics we will not be able to further develop the literature and it will remains incomplete. Our studies support previous contributions arguing that all change of practice and knowledge domains is political struggles and invested in power (Foucault, 1997; Fox, 2000). That means understanding learning, knowledge and innovation, we must acknowledge that all involved processes are fuelled with power and politics. Actually, without addressing power and politics in our study, we will not been able to understand why the innovation failed. Especially, we would not be able to recognize that it involves both top-down and bottom-up activities, as equally important. Power and politics are not necessarily negative, as it involves knowledgeable behaviour and sensemaking activities to how to perform in the best interest of for instance a customer. Even though finance advisers in our study do not feel powerful, but more over empower in the process, they actually use resource power and sensemaking activities and represent key to whether innovation is successfully implemented. Hence, we believe that addressing sensemaking and sensegiving (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Rouleau, 2005; Voronov, 2008) as political acts and differ between resource power, process power and meaning power (Hardy, 2004) provides fruitful approaching in grasping power and politics in future studies.

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