Chapter 17 - Management knowledge

Answers to end of chapter questions

1. What do you understand by the terms tacit and explicit knowledge? What are their contributions to managerial effectiveness?

Explicit knowledge is knowledge that has been formally expressed and ‘codified’, or rendered in some abstract form that can be manipulated by logical reasoning. In a sense, this is knowledge that has been ‘captured’, because it can be aggregated, stored, and transmitted.Tacit knowledge is implicit and intuitive. It consists of the kind of informal know-how that people acquire by experience. As such it is often taken-for-granted knowledge that people may not ‘know’ they possess. Tacit knowledge is thus hard to pin down, and cannot be easily transmitted or interpreted without the ‘knowing subject’.

2. When management knowledge is defined as being a ‘fashion’ does this mean it needs to be dismissed as being transient and unimportant?

Not necessarily as it may mean that that a particular approach to management was suitable at that time and important to the situation. The idea of a fashion is that it is in tune and in touch with the current situation, and when that situation changes so does the fashion.

3. Are most fashions distinctive new ideas, or are they ‘refashioned’ from a batch of old management concepts?

Is it true innovation or old ideas that are being dressed up to appear new? Of course, the ideas themselves are always promoted as being original, and as providing novel solutions to management problems. Yet critics, just as predictably, point out that most of these ideas are reworked and reassembled from a small batch of basic management precepts that hardly change, and themselves are hardly rocket science (see e.g. Guest, 1992).

4. What is Grint’s ‘externalist’ account of the rise of new forms of management knowledge? What factors would it emphasize in explaining some new management fashion?

Grint (1994) has suggested that fashion is a critical perspective that allows us to understand management ideas in deeper ways. It suggests both ‘internal’ and ‘external’ accounts of fashions. Thus, an internalist explanation stresses the ‘intellectual argument’ for a particular idea. An externalist account on the other hand stresses the idea-as-fashion. It explains the rise of fashion in terms of the ‘resonance’ between particular ideas and broader opinion. The kinds of collective beliefs that are a response to social and economic change provide the context for new fashions in management knowledge.
5. What role does rhetoric play in the promotion and popularizing of management ideas? Give some examples of specific themes that have a rhetorical content.

A detailed account of these kinds of narrative structures is provided by Jackson (1999) in his study of the work of Stephen Covey, one of the most prominent management gurus in the US. Covey’s best-known book is *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989) and through this, and other media, he claims to have found the secret of ‘effectiveness’ in business success. Jackson examines how Covey’s ideas are ‘rhetorically constructed’ – that is, the basis on which the message conveyed in the guru’s writings, personal appearances and so on, appeals to people and answers their needs. He argues that rhetoric works because it addresses deep layers of meaning in the individual. The rhetorical message addresses fundamental human drives – a heady mix of basic psychological needs and spiritual motives. In particular, Jackson argues, the power of rhetoric derives from its ability to tap into the human fantasy world. These are the universal human fantasies about identification with powerful figures, the desire to transform our mundane circumstances, and so on. Jackson identifies ‘three primary fantasy themes’ that Covey himself sees as the basis of his approach. These are the ‘building blocks of the rhetorical vision of effectiveness that Covey has skilfully constructed through a number of media’ (p. 355). The themes are:

- **Back to the farm.** This involves a rejection of the quick fix and short termism of business, and is really a moral call for business to operate according to natural and honest rules. The image he uses for this is agriculture and the farm - where nature cannot be cheated and farmers must work with natural laws and not against them. This particular theme Jackson refers to as a ‘scene-setting fantasy’. Heading back to the farm echoes a number of American cultural traditions such as the restoration of the good society (the golden age) and the pioneer spirit.

- **Working from the inside out** is a personal development theme that is all about self-mastery and developing can-do attitudes. The first three of Covey’s seven habits deal with individuals developing responsibility and the self-belief that they can prevail in business. This is an ‘action fantasy’ based on the desire to obtain and possess new and valued goods, because at its most basic it is about a growing sense of personal power and worth (in fact, Covey uses the image of individuals ‘banking’ the emotional value they are creating).

- **Finding true north** is a fantasy of finding direction after being lost. It appeals to the inherent uncertainty of the management task. But also acquiring a sense of direction and purpose in business, as in life, is all about acquiring a ‘moral compass’. This is a ‘character fantasy theme’; it is about being your true self in all the roles you play, and it appeals to the transcendent fantasy motive of reaching a higher purpose and higher goals.
6. Do new management ideas spread because they actually resolve organizational problems?

Not necessarily. Reputations can be structured through rhetoric and discourse, painting an often different picture to reality.

7. What are the main agents that actively diffuse management ideas, and what specific roles do they play?

Research such as that above shows that ideas do not spread by themselves, nor does the diffusion of management knowledge occur automatically. Specific groups and 'agents' are involved that serve as conduits. Neither are these agents passive figures – they actively define and transform management ideas, and in some cases implement them in organizations as well. A range of such agents that include management consultancy and business advice, management gurus, the business media, press and publications, business and management education, and knowledge centres and think tanks of various kinds. The list is a considerable one, covering the consultants, journalists, academics, and high-profile managers influential in formulating and transmitting new ideas.