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SUGGESTED DESIGN FOR HIGHER
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TACIT KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER FOR MANAGERIAL POSITIONS – SUGGESTED DESIGN FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Tacit knowledge utilization and transfer in organizations are critical for maintaining a competitive advantage and for successful cooperation, in the case of educational institutions. Acquiring, extracting and transferring tacit knowledge are difficult tasks, due to the complexity of the tacit knowledge itself, to the myriad of influence factors and the lack of appropriate methods for particular contexts. The process is even more difficult when the tacit knowledge transfer takes place – or should take place – at power level, for various managerial positions – yet without such a transfer, valuable time and resources are wasted (not all transferred experiences have to be used, some might need to be unlearned!). Higher education institutions are the forefront of knowledge transfer, yet preaching and living the preached values remains a delicate endeavor, especially during crises.

The present study, conceptual and exploratory in nature, aims to identify influence factors for tacit knowledge transfer in higher education institutions, as well as potential methods for the tacit knowledge transfer effectuation. It uses literature review based on critical thinking together with participant observation and exploratory introspection in order to suggest a potential design for the future testing and utilization of the identified factors and methods.

The main identified influence factors are: national culture dimensions and professional culture, organizational structures, culture, leadership, and commitment, distributive and procedural justice, transparency, personality traits, cooperativeness, emotional intelligence, interpersonal trust, altruism, attitude towards mistakes. Among these factors we can identify the most frequent barriers, which are physical and professional distance, lack of trust, lack of appreciation for others' ideas, lack of value for one's intuition, unawareness of own knowledge, unwillingness to share, lack of retention, lack of motivation.

The main possible methods for tacit knowledge transfer for managers in higher education institutions are: observation and reflective practice, formal and informal socialization meetings, storytelling, role rotation, mentoring for managers, training of

successors, teams of learning managers, goal-directed interviews at the moment of power transfer, worse practices learning communities, managerial thumb-a-lift.

Keywords: Tacit knowledge transfer; managerial positions; higher education strategies; liminal leadership spaces; power transfer and cultural norms.

JEL Classification: I23, D91, M53.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present material is developed having in mind the simple, well known statement of Michael Polanyi: "I shall reconsider human knowledge by starting from the fact that *we can know more than we can tell.*" (Polanyi, 1966). From all categories of knowledge, tacit one is the most volatile, elusive and unmanageable, at least through classical approaches. Knowledge management (KM), categorization and sharing have been subject for a huge number of studies in time, from the ancient philosophy of Plato and Aristotle to the nowadays literature, even if the syntagm KM itself was created only in the 20th century, through the initial efforts of Polanyi, Nonaka, Davenport and Prusak (Polanyi, 1966; Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Nonaka and Konno, 1998; Davenport and Prusak, 1998). Most of the literature that follows deals with knowledge sharing inside business organizations, in master-trainee, experienced worker-apprentice or teacher-student contexts, when knowledge is transmitted inside various entities within different hierarchical levels; when peer-to-peer knowledge sharing is analyzed, the peers are rarely managers, and most often not at the top of the pyramid. However, the transmission of knowledge - especially the tacit one - at managerial level, when transition from one manager or team of managers to another one occurs, as a transfer of power, is much less studied, at organizational level in general, and in higher education institutions in particular. Higher education institutions are the forefront of knowledge transfer, yet preaching to others and living the preached values internally remains a delicate endeavor, especially during challenging times – the ones we've been living in lately. This is why the aim of the present study, conceptual and exploratory, was to identify potential influence factors for tacit knowledge transfer in higher education institutions, as well as potential methods for the tacit knowledge transfer effectuation at managerial level (deans and vice-deans, rectors and vice-rectors etc.). As methodology it uses literature review (64 articles obtained as intersections for the key terms tacit knowledge, higher education and managerial power transfer) based on critical thinking, together with participant observation (as academic member holding several managerial positions in time) and exploratory introspection in order to suggest a potential design for the future testing and utilization of the identified factors and methods.

2. TACIT KNOWLEDGE DEFINITION AND IMPORTANCE

The logic of the present study is simple: knowledge management is necessary, knowledge sharing is important, tacit knowledge sharing is vital, yet less investigated in the case of managerial transfers of power, and even less in higher education managerial transfers. Thus, we need to find out how we can define, improve, change the process of tacit knowledge sharing at managerial level in higher education institutions.

Higher education institutions, more than any other type of organization, are challenged lately to reconsider their “business model”, their role in society as members of complex networks and in contexts for which the change is exponential and internal resources were trained rather linearly (Schutz *et al.*, 2019; Carayannis and Campbell, 2012).

The importance of knowledge management and sharing was already demonstrated, at both theoretical and practical level (Ku, 2019; Benyahya, 2017; Asrar-ul-Haq *et al.*, 2016; Cabrera *et al.*, 2006; Witherspoon *et al.*, 2013; Lin and Lee, 2004; Zaiř, 2004; Argote *et al.*, 2000; Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Nonaka and Konno, 1998; Szulanski, 1996). As types or categories of knowledge, the literature usually identifies explicit, implicit and tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966; Vaughan, 1979; Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka and Takeuci, 1995; Brockmann and Simmonds, 1997; Nonaka and Konno, 1998; Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Sternberg *et al.*, 1999). Knowledge can be shared and transformed from one category to another, in a process labelled by Nonaka and Takeuci (1995) as the knowledge spiral or SECI model: socialization (from tacit to tacit), externalization (from tacit to explicit), combination (from explicit to explicit) and internationalization (from explicit to tacit).

Explicit knowledge is based on documented information and it is easy to codify, write down, store and exchange or share. Implicit knowledge comes from applied information and consists of learned skills and know-how, and it is still shareable in a certain degree. Tacit knowledge originates in the mind of “knowers”, comes from personal experiences and is intangible and fluid, rather understood than ever stated, difficult to express, and sometimes even difficult to be perceived or realized – because one cannot be necessarily aware of it. This is a huge reservoir of knowledge from which very little is used, as Vaughan stated, “*At any given moment one is conscious of only a small section of what one knows. Intuition allows one to draw on that vast storehouse of unconscious knowledge that includes not only everything that one has experienced or learned either consciously or subliminally, but also the infinite reservoir of the collective or universal unconscious, in which individual separateness and ego boundaries are transcended.*” (Vaughan, 1979).

Various organizations are trying to get this type of tacit knowledge to light, and share it so that it could be utilized, because even small portions of this incredible knowledge resource could help managers to develop better strategies, make better decisions and significantly increase organizational performance

(Brockmann and Simmonds, 1997). A part of this tacit knowledge might get incorporated, with time, in organizational practices, habits and norms, but most of it continues to exist within people, remains unobservable, complex and unpredictable, a type of company asset less definable and much harder “to pin down” (Davenport and Prusak, 1998), not to say it can be easily lost when people leave the organization.

According to Sternberg *et al.*, tacit knowledge is the one that makes the difference between less and more practically-successful individuals, in general, and managers, in particular, and has three key features, related to: the conditions under which it was acquired, its cognitive structure, and the conditions of its use. Sternberg discovered that managers with more tacit knowledge are performing better and receive higher performance ratings (Sternberg *et al.*, 1999).

The sharing of tacit knowledge is a delicate subject not only because it's difficult to define and quantify, but also because sometimes it's hard to say which part of this tacit knowledge should be encouraged and which one should rather be forgotten. In certain challenging contexts, when organizations need to change, “evil” or negative or “burden” type of tacit knowledge might be easier or more willing to be transferred, due to conditioning effects and norms' pressures, while it should be rather “unlearned”, for the sake of progress. As Bonchek noticed, a lot of attention is given to learning processes in organizations, although most of the time the problem is not that of learning, but the unlearning, because the mental models with which the organization operates are obsolete and a new logic is needed (Bonchek, 2016). There are also voices against the concept of unlearning, just apparently borrowed from psychology (Howells and Scholderer, 2016), yet it is quite clear that this process of change through unlearning old habits and learning new ones is of crucial importance. The unlearning process is not about forgetting or somehow “deleting” knowledge from the individual's or organization's memory, but about the ability to choose an alternative mental model or a new, different behavioral paradigm. (Bonchek, 2016).

3. INFLUENCE FACTORS FOR TACIT KNOWLEDGE SHARING

If tacit knowledge is so important, why aren't we using more of it? What motivates people to share tacit knowledge? The extant literature suggest a vast array of influence factors in the process of tacit knowledge sharing, starting at macro, national level (national culture influences) and ending at individual, personality traits level. Sharing tacit knowledge requires a lot of private feelings disclosure, a loss of intimacy in a certain way, and sometimes even recognizing what could be apparently decisional weaknesses or errors. While such a behavior is seen as normal, appreciated and encouraged in some cultures, it is perceived as a weakness and rather disrespected in others, depending on such cultural dimensions as being neutral versus affective (showing or not emotions), specific

versus diffuse (mixing or not personal and professional issues), individualism versus communitarianism (focus on individuals or on the team) or achievement versus ascription (accomplishments or status, especially for promotions) (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2004). The national culture is the highest layer, but inside there are other cultural layers – regional, organizational, professional, and generational – and all these carry influences in the process of sharing tacit knowledge.

The type of organizational culture, the organizational structures and motivation mechanisms, the professional culture, the leadership style and organizational commitment, organizational transparency, relational social capital and the distributive and procedural justice (perceived fairness of outcomes or resource allocations, respectively perceived fairness of rules and decision processes used to determine outcomes) were previously found to influence tacit knowledge sharing in various types of institutions (Szulanski, 1996; Argote *et al.*, 2000; Eraut, 2000; Bartol and Srivastava, 2002; Bock *et al.*, 2005; Foos *et al.*, 2006; Holste and Fields, 2010; Joia and Lemos, 2010; Mohd Soieb, 2010; Suppiah and Singh Sandhu, 2011; Xue *et al.*, 2011; Kingston, 2012; Peet, 2012; Salleh, 2012; Chug, 2013; Matoskova *et al.*, 2013; Witherspoon *et al.*, 2013; Ku, 2019; Goobins and Dooley, 2021).

At individual level, the main factors of influence for the tacit knowledge sharing were found to be personality traits in general, degree of cooperativeness, cooperation bias, emotional intelligence, subjective age, level of interpersonal trust, altruism, perceived personal identity, temporal focus (past, present or future), willingness to learn and share and attitude towards failures or mistakes (Argote *et al.*, 2000; Baumard and Starbuck, 2005; Cabrera *et al.*, 2006; Jain *et al.*, 2007; Holste and Fields, 2010; Joia and Lemos, 2010; Casimir *et al.*, 2012; Gog and Sandhu, 2013; Carter, 2016; Benyahya, 2017; Lazazzara and Za, 2020; Fuller, 2021; Lu *et al.*, 2021).

Several studies were found for the case of higher education institutions, but dealing with the tacit knowledge transfer between peer academics (teachers or students) or between teachers and students. No studies were found for the transfer at managerial level, internally, nor for the tacit knowledge transfer between university partners, at managers' level. The extant literature dealing with tacit knowledge management and sharing at university level treats the same factors already identified for other type of organizations, as well – those we already mentioned at national, organizational or individual level (Jain *et al.*, 2007; Cheng *et al.*, 2009; Peet *et al.*, 2010; Salleh, 2012; Wijetunge, 2012; Chug, 2013; Fullwood *et al.*, 2013; Goh and Sandhu, 2013; Chug, 2015; Djikhy and Moustaghfir, 2019; Nurkka, 2019).

4. METHODS FOR SHARING TACIT KNOWLEDGE

Once factors identified, we were trying to answer the question How is tacit knowledge transferred? Which are the methods used for the tacit knowledge sharing? The starting point was the original Nonaka and Takeuchi article from 1995, explaining the knowledge spiral and the SECI model. Here, the tacit knowledge is transferred into other tacit knowledge through various socialization processes, those in which individuals have the chance to meet, spend time together, discuss and debate, and thus share knowledge. The list of socialization methods identified in previous studies concerning tacit knowledge sharing includes collaboration and social networks, either face-to-face or online, recordings of “lessons learned”, storytelling, mentoring approaches for guided experience sharing, observation and listening, workshops, seminars and apprenticeships, conferences, brainstorming without criticism, role rotation, goal-directed interviews at the moment of power transfer, generative knowledge interviewing, teams of leaders and conversations with leaders, learning from failures through worse practices learning communities, blogs, managerial thumb-a-lift (Reamy, 2002; Hedlund, 2003; Baumard and Starbuck, 2005; Janson, 2007; Mccallum, 2008; Martin-Niemi and Greatbanks, 2010; Peet *et al.*, 2010; Kingston, 2012; Wijetunge, 2012; Panahi *et al.*, 2013; Benyahya, 2017; Buunk *et al.*, 2019; Caulier, 2020).

These methods can be applied considering organizational and professional contexts, as well as situational ones. In higher education the extant literature deals with the role that universities have and how they should encourage tacit knowledge use and sharing for students and teachers. Universities should serve more as borderland spaces – “novel, challenging, permissive and liminal, destabilizing traditional power hierarchies” (Hill *et al.*, 2016). In such liminal, transitional spaces, students could be trained for critical thinking and reflective judgment, for collaborative learning by breaking traditional power relations and hierarchies of higher education. If such a method works with students, it should moreover be used for academics and for university managers.

In general, universities encourage – at least at a declarative level, but most of them in reality, too – the transfer of tacit knowledge, through open communication, peer-trust development, ethical behavior and unrestricted transparency and sharing of knowledge by managers (e Cunha *et al.*, 2010; Chugh 2013; Chugh 2015). Several areas require improvement, especially for spreading the tacit knowledge to all internal and external stakeholders, despite time and resources constraints. In challenging times the usual university rules might become inadequate, requiring for a questioning of old frames and elimination of potential downward spirals; as e Cunha noticed, sometimes leaders are led by contingencies instead of leading them (e Cunha *et al.*, 2010), and they get involved into less clear areas, marked by gray principles, so that leaders may feel “trapped”, not knowing what to do, having a reduced capacity for leading ethically in difficult conditions, and especially not communicating

the gray issues to various governing bodies – and thus not sharing the tacit knowledge anymore, since even the explicit one is not entirely shared.

Newly appointed managers are often in liminal spaces, including in higher education. To be in a liminal space means to be in between something old and something new, in a transition from one position to another one - physically, emotionally, or metaphorically – and they go through specific rites or rituals of passage (e Cunha *et al.*, 2010; Croft *et al.*, 2014; Hawkins and Edwards, 2015). Similar thresholds, traps and rites for novices are found in supervision stories (especially for graduation theses or doctoral ones) (Carter, 2016), and they can be extended to the situation of the newly appointed (either through elections or through hiring competitions) deans or rectors of higher education institutions. Such threshold experiences are troublesome and transformative, and may become overwhelming for the learner, especially in nowadays educational challenges, when people speak about “a crisis of inherited institutions and philosophies, which were meant for a different kind of reality” (Stein, 2017). Benefiting from the sharing of tacit knowledge from the previous managerial teams could relief this burden and reduce the transitional state – the tacit knowledge needed has to be defined, identified, collected and codified, and then transferred and used – dealing with barriers for transmission, as well as barriers for acquisition (Szulanski, 1996; Sternberg *et al.*, 1999; Matoskova *et al.*, 2013; Benyahya, 2017)

5. CONCLUSIONS: REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR THE HIGHER EDUCATION CASE

Three important lessons from the previous literature can be adapted for the case of higher education institutions: the paradox of professional amateurs from the army (McCallum, 2008), professional hybrids in medical institutions (Croft *et al.*, 2014) and the trickster archetype from folklore and religion (Edwards *et al.*, 2021). Universities frequently assume, explicitly or tacitly, that being teaching institutions they are also learning ones, entirely, and that academics should be able to learn how to be good managers in the same way they learned how to become teachers. However things are not as easy as they might seem, because becoming managers, academics get away for their basic profession, and enter liminal spaces in which they can lose identity and become inefficient professional hybrids, amateurs for the “profession of managing”.

The first lesson is that of army officers delegated for assignments in which they had no previous training, neither technical, nor regulatory (McCallum, 2008). The term used by McCallum to describe their situation is “Army of professional amateurs”. Speaking from his own experience and that of close colleagues, he states: “*For branch-specific jobs, the Army provided me excellent training, but every time I had to perform a staff job— which became more frequent as I was promoted to higher ranks—I became an amateur again, having*

to learn new policies, regulations, office networks/relationships, and the large-scale frameworks supporting Army programs.” The situation is surprisingly appropriate for describing what happens in higher education institutions when well-prepared academics are nominated on managerial positions. The new managers were not prepared for the new job, and they rarely have a tacit knowledge sharing opportunity from previous ones. To prepare them in advance or immediately after being appointed, schoolhouses, rotations, simulations, eLearning net-based oral histories, mentor-protégé interviews and discussions would help. As McCallum notices for the army, “the lack of core leadership training in knowledge management principles and technologies hinders the transition to a knowledge-based organization” – and this is entirely true for many higher education institutions, as well.

The second lesson comes from the medical sector, where nurses or physicians get promoted to managerial positions and discover that they lose identity and become so called “professional hybrids” (Croft *et al.*, 2014). Professional hybrids are people situated between managerial and professional groups who usually undergo an identity transition process in order to overcome the conflicts associated with dealing with two distinct organizational realms, their own profession and the manager profession. Identity conflicts appear and there are no recipes for positively solving them. From their study on nurses, Croft *et al.* discovered that in order to have influence across multiple groups (professional and managerial) people need to construct a positive liminal space, otherwise the identity transition is stopped and the effectiveness as hybrids is undermined. In contrast, we demonstrate how nurse hybrids occupy a perverse liminal space, perpetuating identity conflict, preventing identity transition, and undermining their effectiveness as hybrids. However, sometimes a professional resistance to what Croft *et al.* labelled as “managerialism” appears, hybrids are not able anymore to navigate between the leadership position and the values specific to their previous professional identity, and they fail to accomplish their mission.

The third lesson is that of the trickster archetype (Edwards *et al.*, 2021) Edwards *et al.* use this concept in order to problematize the role of the educator/facilitator identity in leadership learning. A trickster is a permanent resident in liminal spaces and a mixture of good and bad, of wisdom and manipulation, of specialist and jolly joker, with various valences in different cultures. According to Edwards, the trickster archetype can be used to think more critically, reflectively and reflexively about the role and practices of educators, and the same is true for the case in which educators become managers.

Our exploratory approach ends with some more reflections for the future. Tacit knowledge sharing has to be rediscovered in higher education institutions, not only for basic teaching activities, but for managerial processes, as well. The

identified influence factors need to be analyzed, so that positive ones are nurtured and barriers for the sharing are removed. The list of identified methods can be also put into practice in universities, for managerial transfers.

If we want higher education institutions to be leaders of change in society, we should reconsider the tacit knowledge sharing processes for their internal leaders – the people who take managerial positions. The liminality of managerial positions in higher education should be seriously investigated and results openly shared. A careful distinction is needed between what managers need to learn in the process of tacit knowledge sharing and what they need to unlearn. Local, culturally influenced perceptions of the trickster archetype need to be harnessed and used in the process of power transition. Finally, more attention should be paid to the process of professional hybridization, so that good professionals in their basic field of activity could overcome identity conflicts and transform into good managers.

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