

Operational Knowledge Management

A Soldier's Guide for Implementing Knowledge
Management in Army Organizations

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Knowledge Management for the U.S. Army's Operational Forces

KM at the Canteen Cup level

By Mr. Dan Elder, CKM, Knowledge Management Advisor

The Challenge: What is Knowledge Management, Anyway?

We have all heard it said that “Knowledge is Power,” but I tell you it isn’t. “Knowledge” does not become “Power” until it is expressed, that is until something is done with the knowledge a person or people possess. Obviously, not all knowledge is valuable, which is something we all can relate to in this day and age with reams of data and multiple inputs from so many sources. But what if we added a process that would provide “actionable” knowledge from people who we consider experienced in the tasks at hand? And, what if we provided our teams a collaborative social environment that encouraged the efficient and rapid use of new knowledge? Then we will have the conditions required to demonstrate the power that knowledge transfer provides to achieve the ultimate goal. This describes Army Operational Knowledge Management (AOKM) and how we will use knowledge to improve performance of individuals and teams and provide our forces “Power” over a quickly adapting adversary.

Knowledge Management (KM), among the United States Army's operational forces, was slow in coming. But KM is clearly a central theme to the efforts which began with the issuing of Army Knowledge Management (AKM) Guidance Memorandum Number 1 in August 2001, two subsequent memorandums, and the publishing of Army Regulation 25-1, *Army Knowledge Management and Information Technology* in June 2004. Prepared by the Secretary of the Army and the Army Chief of Staff, these documents kicked off the effort to transform the Army into a network-centric, knowledge-based force. Of AKM Memo #1's five goals, Goals 1 and 2 appear to be the most elusive to achieve. They are to; *Adopt governance and cultural*

changes to become a knowledge-based organization and to Integrate knowledge management and best business practices into Army processes.

There is great progress in achieving the original goals, yet there still remains much to do. One of the first challenges in bringing Knowledge Management to any organization is to differentiate between Knowledge Management and Information Management (IM). IM is about managing physical assets (stuff); KM is about managing intellectual assets (know-how). As a business process, KM has been in use since roughly 1985 when the World Bank began its knowledge sharing efforts. Most would argue KM is not new and that sharing good ideas informally, and often without a defined process or strategy, has been around since early man-made cave drawings created to share information between other members of the tribe. But, in the simplest of terms, Army KM is about the processes and techniques used to rapidly transfer experience and provide a common understanding from an experienced Soldier to an inexperienced Soldier. Done properly, KM can support and improve organizational learning and foster an innovative environment, resulting in an increase in performance. In an individual, these are the traits we would expect of a “Pentathlete.”

Transfer of knowledge and experience happens all the time through traditional leader-led relationships within the Army's institutional schools and by peer-assists and coaching. But those methods are not keeping pace with today's operational dynamics and the speed in which change must happen. The Army's hierarchical approach to a top-down transfer of information is not conducive to developing leaders who must make quick decisions on many complicated fronts. When we consider the cycle time to transfer Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs) from a unit through the traditional (and many times needed) filters to vet and substantiate sound doctrinal principles, the result often becomes irrelevant or outdated and ends up on a shelf collecting dust.

Brave, New World: Where were you During the Revolution?

To best understand Knowledge Management one must acknowledge that KM is an emerging discipline that is rapidly maturing and already affects all that you do at home and at work. Change is happening at a revolutionary versus evolutionary pace much in part due to the expansion of the World Wide Web and through a phenomenon known as social networking. Social networking evolved as the “new way” people exchange information (communicate and collaborate). Digital technology has in fact altered so many of the “old ways” of doing business that barring a calamitous event, it is apparent there is no turning back.

We must recognize that young adults today have grown-up in this digital environment, surrounded by inputs and digital stimuli. They are capable of co-processing and multi-tasking, and we must understand that they not only think differently than previous generations, but also process information differently. Consultant and educator Marc Prensky coined the terms *Digital Native* for those born during and after the digital revolution, and *Digital Immigrant* for those who grew up before the 1990s. This difference is mostly apparent when digital natives, those who have always known and used digital technologies like cell-phones, the internet, digital music players and video cameras, join an established organization like the Army and find themselves constantly surrounded by “legacy” processes, systems and procedures that keep the organization running. Couple the difference in communicating with the obvious fact that senior leaders, though quick to adapt, are by birthright digital immigrants and the communication problem is compounded. Without action or adoption of the global social networks, we will fail to connect to current and future generations.

I Get the “Why,” now Tell me the “How.”

Before you consider embarking on a Knowledge Management effort, you must first understand its three components; People, Processes and Technology. Regardless of your position, as a new KM professional, a leader attempting to learn more about KM, or a casual observer, understanding these three components is a must. Though they seem fairly straightforward, a review of each is in order to understand and implement them.

Every organization, whether it’s a football team, a for-profit business or an Army unit, is nothing without its people. Though you can shuffle people around or replace old people with new people, the people that make up an organization are the engine that allows it to accomplish its assigned tasks. Consider a mature unit with traditional behavioral norms. You will most likely have high performers, low performers, and then everyone else in between. In developing processes the key is including the right people (or teams) at the right place and at the right time to ensure you have the greatest chance of success. KM is only valuable when people learn how to efficiently and effectively use knowledge to improve performance, and the processes are integral to successful knowledge management.

Processes are the methods to create, organize and apply knowledge. Here is an example. Someone gives you and your “team” a task to accomplish. Most people, either on paper or in their heads, think of the steps they’ll need to follow to complete the task. Experienced people, including those who “own” the task or are integral to its success, are usually intuitive contributors and can quickly identify wasteful activity or unnecessary steps that impede efficiency. Then by using process mapping or by following something as simple as a plan–execute–analyze model to determine effectiveness, the process aspect of KM becomes clearer.

Technology, the third component of KM, is the 21st century’s method that facilitates the first two components. In the military, and even in many private sector firms, getting the experienced users or experts together in one place to solve a problem or begin a new task is many times difficult to do. Technology provides some solutions, usually networked computer workstations or video teleconferences that enable collaboration and information sharing opportunities. Technology also allows the creation and management of targeted and functional area-based online communities available 24/7, encouraging social networking and independent research.

Not Now, I’m Kinda Busy: KM is Not for Us.

Consider that any organization believing they are too busy for KM is probably the best candidate for implementing Knowledge Management. But to prove a point, consider ARFORGEN (Army Forces Generation) and the phenomenon of rediscovery. As a unit enters its ARFORGEN “build” phase they are

typically infused with new Soldiers, while a RESET unit traditionally undergoes a “brain-drain” as experienced and highly- effective Soldiers throughout the chain of command depart in a relatively short timeframe. Left Seat/Right Seat rides and continuity books can go a long way toward solving these problems but still much of the organization’s experience will be lost. A possible solution could be to establish an environment that requires Soldiers to document their experiences and describe processes. An institution’s knowledge is in the heads of its formal and informal leaders. Knowledge is also written down and embedded within files and databases populated among units’ various Information Technology (IT) systems. From calendars to policies, and operating procedures to leader help aids, the ability to share and archive digital files within the organization and across organizational boundaries is one method of reducing the pain caused by personnel turnover. Another is an online community where individuals can collaborate with their peers across the globe to discuss ideas, suggestions, and trade Observations, Insights and Lessons Learned (OIL). Provided the right suite of tools Soldiers can reach out to subject matter experts using streaming audio and video to interact and address individual or organizational challenges. Something as simple as a KM “Expert Map” that identifies people and their talents, and documents their physical location and contact information, becomes invaluable, as does a searchable database applying a rules-based “tagging” convention that allows for rapid discovery of relevant content. Some could also find great utility in a targeted portal that brings people with the same interest and goals together in a collaborative environment. Many of these capabilities are available in the public domain today and go by familiar names like YouTube, Google, and Facebook. They are so much a part of the digital natives’ routine, being used for personal collaboration and knowledge sharing, that there is the pressing need to provide comparable tools to allow Soldiers access to the same capabilities they are accustomed to in their every-day lives. We are much closer to achieving the net-centric goal the Army envisioned in AKM Memorandum #1 when Army organizations insert special teams of expert KM practitioners who are trained in implementing KM processes and know how to develop best practices at the tactical and organizational levels.

KM Convert? Here is How to Succeed.

In bringing Knowledge Management into a willing organization, it is imperative that well-

meaning leaders understand they are not the first ones to do this. Many have traveled the path of KM implementation and the corpses of a variety of good ideas litter the landscape. One of the first leader responsibilities to an organization is to recruit a KM professional, designate and develop a KM lead from within, or both. Commanders and subordinate leaders must serve as the champions for KM and delegate the KM operational effort to a designated representative. The span of control and the size of the organization will dictate the amount of work required of the KM advocate. New doctrine is emerging that will authorize permanent military and civilian personnel positions at various echelons. They will serve as great sources of information and help integrate KM into daily operations.

Another important first step an organization needs to consider is a complete assessment. A KM assessment is a baseline determination of what the organization does with respect to its mission. The assessment must determine what the organization knows as well as its knowledge needs and its knowledge assets. Secondly, as with anything, it needs an action plan. The foundation for any KM effort is the KM Strategy, a guiding document describing what an organization needs to know and what it needs to do to fill knowledge gaps. The KM action plan quickly becomes apparent after the KM assessment is completed and the people, processes and technology shortfalls are apparent. Identified “knowledge gaps” should be prioritized using the seven-step military decision-making process (MDMP), which includes developing courses of action (Step 3.) This becomes the organization’s change management plan (CMP) and should be known by all within the organization. It should become the yardstick by which KM practitioners measure knowledge-sharing success or failure.

Stumbling Blocks: Learning from Others

KM is not a project or a separate effort that becomes a branch on an organizational chart any more than Composite Risk Management or Equal Opportunity is a separate branch. Leaders who understand and adopt an innovative culture, and who encourage new ideas, become strong advocates for a culture of change and it becomes apparent across the organization. Rapid generation and transfer of knowledge from the experienced to the novice becomes a standard process and the unit’s effectiveness rises sharply, in contrast to similar non-KM practicing organizations.

Skepticism runs deep in implementing any new process, and it is human nature to resist change. Those who have invested many years, even careers in legacy processes, are usually entrenched at levels that could cause them to become substantial roadblocks. Overcoming impediments to implementation becomes a challenge for any KM practitioner or advocate, and the champion can make the difference between success and failure. It takes a continuous effort by leaders. There is no such thing as having too many champions within an organization.

Knowledge Management Implementation methods could take a number of forms. Brent Hayward, Professional Services VP at InQuira, suggests there are three approaches to executing KM. They are the “Big Bang,” where KM is rolled out across the organization as one coordinated effort where the champion, usually the commander or a senior leader, starts a top-down implementation plan and the subordinates are expected to fall in line. A second form is the “Follow the Leader” plan, where a section within the organization begins its KM efforts and then other sections sequentially roll out KM using lessons gleaned from those before. The third form is the “Pilot and Campaign” approach. This is where an organization initiates a test program, reviews the results, and if successful expands to the next group to implement. Each form has their strengths and weaknesses and the KM teams need to think through which approach will work best for their organization.

KM is not a website, a chat room, or another MBA-inspired business model “du jour” that can be applied to any military organization. Knowledge Management is the systematic process of culture change, espoused by KM experts to solve problems and create opportunities within operational parameters. Consider Yahoo.com and the affect it has on other mediums. From Yahoo’s portal you can read the latest live podcasts (radio). This online community of the 21st century is revolutionizing how people act and interact. Consider the effects of portable devices like cellular phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), GPS devices, user-customized information portals and on-line gaming and decision-making web sites on socialization and productivity.. Today these changes are global and far-reaching, which brings in an entirely new discussion about just how open we should be and how we should protect our personal information.

Summary

Knowledge Management, the act of sharing valuable information and knowledge between peers, subordinates and superiors, is not new. Only the conditions have changed. Using efficiency of familiar social networking tools and IT systems and applying sets of rules and processes to exchange knowledge are the first step in using KM to improve organizational effectiveness. Then consider the KM champion and advocates needed to affect change, the need to develop a KM strategy and operational plan, and an approach to implementing the KM plan.

Instrumental in developing a culture of innovation within an organization is an understanding of the principles of Knowledge Management. Equally important is recognizing that certain conditions must be established, and that the experts used are trained and qualified in the techniques that bring about success. Attempting a half-hearted effort without including the main components or not understanding and applying the principles are sure-fire ways to doom KM efforts. We must win the battle of managing knowledge to be an adaptive Army, capable of quickly changing course and always looking forward. There are few things as equally important.

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