

The role, skills and characteristics of the knowledge management leader

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If your KM leader is not yet in place, this chapter will provide some guidance on who to hire, and what she or he will do. Alternatively, you may already have been appointed to lead the KM implementation programme, and you can use this chapter to reinforce the skills you already have, and identify the skills you will need to develop to perform your role.

The chapter contains the following elements:

- a description of the role of the KM leader, and a list of recommended accountabilities;
- a discussion of whether the KM leader should be an internal or external appointment (we recommend internal);
- the most important characteristic for an external appointment, namely practical experience;
- the important competencies for the KM leader;
- a warning about the ‘personality trap’ for the KM leader;
- a useful metaphor for the KM leader – that of a gardener.

The role of the knowledge management leader

Also known as the KM programme manager, the director of KM or the chief knowledge officer, this person is in charge of KM implementation. They are accountable for designing and introducing a working KM framework within the business, which delivers business value and is seen by staff and management as supporting effective business practice. The KM leader will act as project manager for the framework implementation project, and will represent KM at the senior level of management.

The accountabilities of the KM leader during the implementation programme are as follows:

- Develop, together with the leadership of the organization, the vision, objectives, metrics and deliverables of the KM implementation programme. This is done during the KM strategy phase, which precedes KM implementation. Full details of the KM strategy phase can be found in the book *Designing a Successful KM Strategy* (Barnes and Milton, 2015).
- Deliver the implementation project objectives, within the agreed time frame and to the agreed cost and performance metrics. The KM leader manages the implementation project. They are accountable for delivery, for the budget, for managing the members of the KM implementation team, and for managing progress and activity (the standard accountabilities of a project manager).
- Define and test the KM framework through the testing and piloting phase, and ensure that the KM framework operates effectively and efficiently. 'Effectively' means that the desired objectives are met, and 'efficiently' means within a reasonable range of effort and cost. At the end of the piloting stage, the KM leader is accountable for delivering a tested and validated framework.
- Ensure that the KM framework delivers business value. Delivering the framework is not an end in itself; the framework only exists to deliver business value and the KM leader must keep this value objective constantly in mind. Very often the success of the pilots, for example, will be measured in business terms: money saved, time saved, or value created.

- Act as champion for the corporate vision of KM. The KM leader is the figurehead and champion for KM within the organization. She or he is responsible for ensuring that knowledge management, as applied within the organization, is understood, and seen as an important and valuable activity by all of the main stakeholders.

Once the implementation programme is over, the KM leader role changes to a more operational role, concerned with maintaining KM activity, monitoring and reporting on the application of KM, auditing the application of the framework on a regular basis, and looking for enhancements to the KM framework.

Tip

Use this section of *The Knowledge Manager's Handbook* to check and update your job description. Is anything missing? Is there any part of your job description which is surplus to requirements? Update your job description accordingly, and if there are any significant changes, be sure to discuss them with your manager.

Should the knowledge management leader be an internal or external appointment?

Should the KM leader should be an internal appointment (and often therefore with little experience in KM), or should you should recruit a KM expert to take this post? Our advice is that an internal appointment gives more advantages than an external one. KM is a simple idea to grasp, but very difficult to do in practice. The idea that people should share knowledge with each other and learn from each other is not complicated; the challenge is getting it to actually happen. Implementing KM is about culture change, and culture change is both difficult and politically charged, and best handled by an 'insider'. Of the knowledge managers surveyed by Knoco in 2014 and 2017, 85 per cent said their KM leader was an internal appointment (Knoco, 2017).

The KM leader should ideally be an existing respected senior member of the organization, with a history of leading change, who knows the internal

politics and knows how to get things done in the organization. Learning enough knowledge management to lead a KM programme can be done quickly, with the right mentoring and coaching from specialists. Learning the politics of an organization can take years, if not an entire career.

CASE STUDY

One of us worked with an organization where one of the elements of the KM framework called for stronger governance in the shape of corporate policies around the management of records, and clearer guidance about balancing the need for information security against the need to share knowledge across silos. With the KM leader, we went to the senior leadership team to ask them for endorsement to develop clear policies to this effect. Their reaction was unenthusiastic, and instead of endorsement we got lots of conflicting responses as disagreements emerged around the table about how to handle the issue. Several senior leaders thought that KM should be entirely voluntary, and should not be governed by policy. We were concerned that this would be a roadblock, but the KM leader was not disheartened. He told his team to go ahead anyway – ‘When they see what the policy looks like, they will understand why it’s important.’ And indeed, the policies were eventually adopted. The KM leader knew when he could sidestep the formal approval process and get things done a different way, because he knew how his colleagues thought and operated.

The most important characteristic for an external appointment

If there is no suitable and willing internal candidate and you end up appointing an external KM expert to lead an internal KM programme, the first thing you should look for on their CV is practical experience. There is no point in hiring a KM expert who doesn’t have a track record of implementation delivery. This point was made forcefully to us by a knowledge manager in a large engineering firm:

I would (hire) somebody with a practical background – somebody who maybe likes the academic side and likes to research, but who has put that research back

into delivery. If I was recruiting somebody and I had an interview and I asked, ‘Do you think you were successful (in your last KM implementation)?’ and they said, ‘Yes we were absolutely successful’ I would instantly be suspicious, because knowledge management is not straightforward. I want practical evidence that it is painful. I want to see the blood and the guts. I want to know that they have been there and they have struggled with KM.

What competencies does the knowledge management leader need?

First and foremost, you need a proven ‘change agent’ to lead your KM implementation. Leading change is different from leading other types of projects, and requires distinct approaches and skillsets. People with a proven history of change leadership are difficult to find in any organization, but the ability of the KM leader to deliver change is a crucial success factor for the implementation project.

Secondly, the leader needs influencing skills. Influencing management, stakeholders and knowledge workers is a big part of the leader’s role. The KM leader needs to have strong communication and influencing skills, and if they are a proven change leader they will already have these. We cover influencing techniques in more detail in Chapter 18.

The KM leader needs to know the company, the company structure and strategy, the company terminology and the stories that circulate around the organization, and they also need to be widely known. Ideally they should have history and credibility in more than one division, rather than having spent their whole career in marketing, or in research, or in finance. They should know the important people, and have strong internal networks.

The KM leader needs the ability to take a long-term view. They need to be in KM for the long haul, as an implementation project can take several years before the framework is fully embedded. They need to focus on the long-term change programme, while still moving KM forward through a series of quick wins.

Above all, the leader needs to be able to translate KM into the day-to-day working language of the organization. KM jargon and theory should be kept within the KM team and their immediate circle of knowledge champions, while to the business, the KM leader should be able to speak in business terms. This is another reason why the KM leader should be someone with wide experience within the business divisions.

Tip

Assess yourself against these competences, and ask your team and your manager to assess you as well. If you are lacking in any of these areas, see what you can do to strengthen your competence. Build your network, go on an 'influencing skills' course, or take training in change management. If you aspire to a KM leadership role in the future, actively seek out diverse roles within the business (not just in KM), and get involved in change programmes. Find a mentor who has the qualities and competencies that you aspire to, and observe how they handle tricky situations and roadblocks.

The personality trap

A strong, passionate leader is essential for an effective KM implementation team. However, the risk in relying on the personality of a strong leader to drive transformation is that when the leader moves on, transformation can falter.

For example, a project manager working in a major project in South East Asia took the lead in implementing KM in his part of the business. He set up a knowledge network of project managers who would meet, exchange documents, and swap lessons learned for further re-use. And it worked – in his area he cut costs, shortened timelines and improved safety statistics. He acted as champion, thought leader, and role model for KM within the wider business. Then he left, moving on to another part of the business. The community stopped functioning. Knowledge capture ceased. Many people in the business claimed that they were unaware of what he had been doing. Knowledge management in the South East Asia division dwindled away and died. The culture reverted to where it had been before.

No matter how strong the leader's personality, and no matter how much they can get done by personally driving change, there comes a time when they have to pass over the reins – not to another strong personality, but to an embedded framework that is going to function no matter who is driving it.

Tip

Always have a succession plan in mind. If you are the KM leader, find one or two understudies to mentor, or identify potential candidates who can succeed you if you move on. If you are responsible for identifying the KM leader, always keep a mental checklist of potential candidates, and ensure any transition has at least six months' preparation and handover time.

A metaphor

People often think of knowledge as being organic. An ecosystem or a garden is a pretty good metaphor for the world of knowledge in an organization. Knowledge is something that grows and develops. It can be replicated and seeded. It is not something solid and static like a car or a factory or a coin that can be grasped and controlled and physically managed. Instead it needs to be nurtured and tended.

The KM leader, in this metaphor, is the head gardener. If you want to produce flowers or vegetables, there is hard work involved. Gardens require a lot of management to bear fruit.

Let's assume you are tending the knowledge garden for your organization, driven by a desire to create value for the key stakeholders – the knowledge workers, the management, and your external customers. If you want to create value from a garden, you don't just 'create the conditions so anything can grow', because all you will get is nettles, brambles and other weeds. Gardening is extremely active.

Tilling and fertilizing the ground

For gardening and for KM, you need to get the conditions right for growth. This is the culture change element of your role – the communication strategy and the hearts and minds campaign described in Chapters 18 and 19. You need to provide the supporting infrastructure. Just as a gardener needs to put in place the canes, cloches and trellises to support the new seedlings, so you need to ensure there is sufficient technology to

support emergent KM activities (recognizing, of course, that technology alone will not create KM, any more than trellises alone will create a garden).

Planting the seeds

These are the proof-of-concept events and the KM pilot projects (Chapter 22); the early knowledge assets, KM practices and trial communities of practice that you might set up where there is greatest demand and greatest value.

Watering and fertilizing the growing seeds

As a knowledge manager, the early seeds in your KM garden will need your supervision and your support. You will need to work with the community of practice leaders, the knowledge owners and the project staff to ensure the early KM work does not wither and die through lack of care.

Propagating growth

Some of the plants in your KM garden will thrive. Learn from these, find out the secrets of their success, and seek to reproduce these elsewhere. Just as a gardener will take cuttings, runners and seeds from their prize-winning plants, you too can propagate success from the best performers.

Removing the weeds and pests

If there are any things that hamper the growth in your KM garden – be these incentives that backfire, loud sceptics, or misbehaviour in community-of-practice discussions – then you need to address them, and see if you can remove them before they start to spread. For example, incentives that drive internal competition may need removal before they stunt the growth of KM or kill your tender plants.

This is all very hard work, but the rewards for successful KM are the same as those for a successful gardener – a thriving ecosystem and a mountain of produce.

Tip

If the head gardener metaphor doesn't appeal to you, find another one. Perhaps you are the knowledge supply chain manager, or the conductor of the KM orchestra. A good metaphor can often help you keep your role in context.

Summary

The role of the KM leader is crucial for the success of KM implementation. In this chapter we have explored the role in detail, discussing the accountabilities, background and competence than an effective KM leader (or head knowledge gardener) requires. In the next two chapters we will look at the people who will support the KM leader: the KM team members and your organization's senior management.

References

- Barnes, S and Milton, N J (2015) *Designing a Successful KM Strategy: A guide for the knowledge management professional*, Information Today, Medford, NJ
- Knoco (2017) Knowledge Management Survey [online] <https://www.knoco.com/knowledge-management-survey.htm> (archived at <https://perma.cc/VCY7-LHL7>) [accessed 26 January 2019]