

Breaking the Barriers to Knowledge Sharing

By Cindy Hubert and Brittany Lopez

Time and time again, APQC's research in knowledge management (KM) has proven that a knowledge-sharing culture leads to increased productivity, improved cycle times for business processes, and innovation. The ongoing role of KM is to develop an environment where people freely create, share, and use information and knowledge; work together toward a common purpose; and are supported and rewarded for doing so.

While this may seem like an easy feat, it is not. It is imperative to remember that implementing a KM program is not an automatic trigger to transform an organization's culture. Yet, many KM leaders immediately begin their efforts by trying to "change the culture." It is at this point that APQC suggests you *stop, collaborate, and listen*.

It is vital to appreciate the culture of your organization and what drives people's behaviors before trying to implement any type of enterprise-wide change. Your level of cultural understanding could determine the success (or failure) of the proposed change to a familiar process, routine, or technology.

Culture change is more often a consequence of knowledge sharing than an antecedent to it.

—Carla O'Dell and Cindy Hubert

[*The New Edge in Knowledge: How Knowledge Management Is Changing the Way We Do Business*](#) (Wiley 2011)

DEFINING THE BARRIERS

There are, and will always be, barriers that hinder the flow of knowledge among colleagues. People bring their own values, beliefs, and habits into workplace, and KM cannot achieve its objectives without implementing solutions to overcome behavior-related barriers. We often try to change our culture before understanding it—without taking into account the core values of the organization; the entrenched ideas about how "things get done around here;" and the variety of perspectives contributed by people with different jobs, in different geographic locations, from different generations, and so forth.

Figure 1 lists 10 common impediments to knowledge sharing inside organizations. While the barriers appear in countless versions and variations, these represent high-level categories into which those specific challenges tend to fall.

Cultural Barriers to Knowledge Sharing



Figure 1

Below is an explanation of each barrier to help you think about your organization's culture and the potential obstacles that may impact people's knowledge-sharing behaviors.

1. Awareness

Awareness refers to the widespread communication of KM approaches and activities across the organization. Organizations typically market the available KM capabilities and approaches so that people know how to connect to content and expertise. However, if the message is not communicated sufficiently or in the right manner, employees may not understand the tools and approaches available to them, when they would use them, or why. This will result in slow adoption of knowledge-sharing behaviors since people don't know where to go or how to connect.

For information on building or improving awareness of KM, see:

- ▶ [Deploy a Targeted Communication Plan for Knowledge Management](#)
- ▶ [Teach Employees Which Knowledge Management Tool to Use in Which Situation](#)
- ▶ [Promote Awareness of Communities of Practice and Communicate Their Value](#)

2. Cultural

Culture encompasses behaviors, working norms, unwritten or spoken rules about "how things work," or processes that shape situational context. In large organizations, cultural nuances may change depending on functional, business-unit, geographic, or geo-political boundaries. Examples of cultural barriers include:

- ▶ a corporate culture that does not value knowledge sharing;
- ▶ a range of sub-cultures (e.g., teams) within the organization that are not bound together by the same values or business rules/principles; and
- ▶ the requirement to share knowledge in a language that is not one's primary language.

For information on addressing cultural barriers, see:

- ▶ [Why and How to Build a Collaborative Culture](#)
- ▶ [Configure Your KM Program to Mirror Existing Structures and Workflows](#)
- ▶ [Aim for Global Consistency in KM, but Allow for Some Customization to Accommodate Local Culture](#)

3. Distance

Distance is the separation between individuals, teams, functions, and so forth within an organization. These separations may be geographic (e.g., teams in different countries or regions), or they may be structural (e.g., people who are just a few hundred yards away from one another, but are focused on different projects or processes). Regardless of the reason, infrequent contact is a form of distance.

For information on addressing distance barriers, see:

- ▶ [Promoting Collaboration Across Physical, Structural, and Conceptual Boundaries](#)
- ▶ [Seamless Collaboration: Enabling Employees to Work Together Across Boundaries](#)

4. Experience

Experience refers to the knowledge or competencies that a person develops over time in a specific role, usually through observation and direct participation in work activities. Experience-related barriers to knowledge sharing can occur when an employee has very little experience or a great deal. For example, someone might not participate in knowledge sharing because of a perceived lack of experience (you might hear this person say something like, "I'm new, what can I contribute to this discussion?"). On the other hand, employees with deep expertise can impede the free flow of knowledge and ideas if they are perceived as the authority or "last word" on a subject or activity.

For information on addressing experience-related barriers, see:

- ▶ [Introduce Knowledge Management Offerings as Part of New-Hire Onboarding](#)
- ▶ [Expose New Hires to Communities of Practice](#)
- ▶ [Showcase and Leverage Subject Matter Experts](#)

5. Knowledge Hoarding

This barrier refers to people who are hesitant or unwilling to share/contribute knowledge for the good of the larger audience. In many cases, knowledge hoarders believe that “knowledge is power” and that, by sharing what they know, they may decrease their value to the organization and potentially put their jobs in jeopardy. When widespread across an organization, knowledge hoarding is often linked to cultural barriers, lack of sponsorship, and/or misaligned measures.

For information on overcoming knowledge hoarding, see:

- ▶ [Ensuring That Collaborators Feel Valued](#)
- ▶ [Six Potential Barriers to the Transfer of Best Practices](#)

6. Misaligned Measures

Measures play a significant role in shaping an organization’s values and internal culture. To that end, barriers to knowledge sharing may occur when performance measures for individuals, teams, or groups conflict with desired knowledge-sharing behaviors. For example, if the measurement system puts functions or business units in direct competition with one another, providing incentives to “beat” other parts of the business on metrics, that may create a structural barrier to sharing and collaboration across those groups. Similarly, if the organization has no measures or incentives to promote knowledge-sharing behaviors, then it will be more difficult to motivate employees to participate.

For information on creating well-aligned measures, see:

- ▶ [The Ins and Outs of Measuring Knowledge Management](#)
- ▶ [Use Rewards and Recognition to Acknowledge Employee Knowledge Contributions](#)
- ▶ [Make Career Progression a Payoff for Employees Who Participate in KM](#)

7. Relationships

This barrier relates to the connections—or lack thereof—between individuals. Whether face-to-face or virtual, weak or tenuous relationships can impede sharing, access to knowledge, reuse, and connectivity (see Trust). Often, relationship barriers are linked to other challenges around organizational culture or trust. In addition, relationships may suffer in organizations that do not provide opportunities to communicate and network (through in-person conferences and events, webinars and roundtables, online discussion tools, an expertise location system, etc.).

For information on strengthening relationships within the work force, see:

- ▶ [Help Community Members Build Trusted Relationships in Virtual Environments](#)
- ▶ [How to Foster Collaboration Without Breaking the Bank](#)
- ▶ [Six Potential Barriers to the Transfer of Best Practices](#)

8. Sponsorship

Sponsorship refers to endorsement and support from senior leaders, either at the enterprise or local level. Barriers related to sponsorship might include:

- ▶ Failure to secure a visible or engaged sponsor to champion the knowledge-sharing program;
- ▶ leaders/managers who do not communicate the value of knowledge-sharing activities or who do not actively participate themselves (i.e., not “walking the talk”); and
- ▶ few resources allocated to knowledge sharing because of lack of alignment with core business objectives or outcomes.

For information on securing sponsorship for and championing KM, see:

- ▶ [Developing a Knowledge Strategy That Senior Leaders Can Get Behind](#)
- ▶ [Designate Executive Role Models for Knowledge Management](#)
- ▶ [Who’s the Boss? 10 Leadership Behaviors That Inspire Teamwork and Collaboration](#)

9. Time

Time refers to the minutes/hours (or, more generally, the effort) it takes to participate in knowledge sharing. For example, how fast and easy is it to contribute content, respond to a question in a discussion forum, or search for best practices? Examples of time as a barrier include:

- ▶ employees who think they are too busy to share knowledge;
- ▶ employees who see knowledge sharing as “outside the scope” of their jobs (may relate to the Misaligned Measures barrier);
- ▶ KM tools/approaches with long learning curves or that require significant time investments to participate; and
- ▶ KM approaches that involve inefficient or non-value-added activities, such as asking experts to answer the same questions over and over again.

For more information on addressing time-related barriers, see:

- ▶ [Promoting Collaboration Across Physical, Structural, and Conceptual Boundaries](#)
- ▶ [Delivering Knowledge at the Teachable Moment](#)

10. Trust

Trust is the confidence people have in the content and expertise available to them, as well as their reliance on others to provide information and support to help them address problems and opportunities. When someone trusts their colleagues, he/she is confident in their ability, character, and the truth of the information they present. Trust is strongly linked to the strength of employee relationships, though a robust vetting process for content and experts may help in some situations. A common trust-related barrier is that content is perceived to be unreliable because the sources of the knowledge are unknown. For example, an anonymous knowledge

contribution, or one associated with a person no longer at the organization, is much less likely to be trusted.

For more information on addressing building and maintaining trust, see:

- ▶ [Help Community Members Build Trusted Relationships in Virtual Environments](#)
- ▶ [Seamless Collaboration: Enabling Employees to Work Together Across Boundaries](#)
- ▶ [Develop Transparent Processes So Employees See the Impact of the Ideas, Knowledge, and Lessons They Contribute](#)

NEXT STEPS

Now that you're aware of the barriers your organization may face in terms of knowledge sharing, you can evaluate your culture and systematically address the obstacles that pose the biggest concerns. For example, are employees not sharing knowledge because they're 10,000 miles apart and speak four different languages, or is it that everyone feels overworked and sees sharing as an additional time burden? All these challenges can be addressed, but you have to pinpoint the structural and cultural influences that are discouraging knowledge sharing and then work within the context of the existing culture to solve the problems.

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