

FOUNDATIONS ON THE ROAD TO BECOME KNOWLEDGE CENTERS

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KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AT FOUNDATIONS

Foundations are traditionally in the philanthropy business. The latest years however there is an ever stronger consciousness that foundations are also in the Knowledge business. While attributing grants, they do research, evaluations, follow up, networking, ...

The future challenge for foundations lies in creating impact on society through knowledge sharing and knowledge development in exchange with society.

1. *What exactly is a Foundation ?*

Foundations are a specific type of organisation. Before entering into the knowledge subject, first a view on what foundations exactly are.

Foundations typically :

- are separately-constituted non-profit bodies
- have their own dependable source of income, usually but not exclusively from an endowment or capital
- have their own governing board
- use their financial resources for educational, cultural, religious, research, social or other public benefit purposes
- use their financial resources either by making grants to citizens associations or by operating their own programmes and projects.

2. *Value creation by foundations*

Up till recently just ' doing good ' was already good enough. Lately more and more foundations are preoccupied with creating a maximum impact on society with the limited means that are available. A new type of considerations enters the strategic thinking. ' Doing good ' shifts towards ' how can we do better ? '

In ' philanthropy's new agenda: creating value ' M. Porter and M. Kramer clearly distinguish four ways of creating value :

1. selecting the best grantees

Foundations use their expertise to find the organisations that are most creative, cost effective and that address urgent or overlooked needs in society

2. signalling other funders

Impact can be increased by signalling either other donors where there are opportunities for funding, or grantees to guide them to other funders.

3. improving the performance of grant recipients

A step further is to help improve the capabilities of the grantees. This can be done by means of management support or by creating knowledge sharing communities amongst the grantees.

4. advancing the state of knowledge and practice

An important role for foundations is to advance the state of knowledge and prac-

tice in the social sector, based on their experiences and by using their networks. At this point they become real knowledge centers.

Whereas foundations are strong on the first two points, the latter remain an important challenge.

3. Knowledge management at the KBF : what we learned up till now

Knowledge management is an explicit strategic orientation taken by the board of directors and strongly sponsored by management. A knowledge management approach has been developed in a systematic way :

1. Defining the KM strategy
2. Identifying the supporting ICT strategy
3. Set priorities and start implementing while channelling all free initiatives

3.1. Defining the KM strategy

Based on interviews and discussions, the key knowledge for the foundation has been identified. Km will focus on how to organise, structure and create a platform for the development of this knowledge.

Since the foundation is a type of think tank, the knowledge strategy is strongly development oriented. Two strategic orientations have been defined. Firstly explicating and codifying an important part of our knowledge. The information and knowledge that will be explicated concerns our stakeholders, our projects, methods, and benchmarking with other Foundations. Secondly, an important focus will lie on the development of communities ranging from project teams to thematic interest groups.

Lessons learned :

- the KM strategy allows to focus clearly and, important, to indicate what will not be covered
- in launching KM, the strategy serves as a good means for communication and allows to manage expectations

- sponsorship from the top is a must

3.2. Identifying the supporting ICT strategy

" ICT is only 20% of the story but it should function 100% " is a statement which the KM Community subscribed without hesitation.

At the foundation, many ICT islands existed, inhibiting efficient knowledge sharing. In view of a developing a better knowledge sharing platform, an overall ICT strategy has been defined.

Lessons learned :

- the time needed for the identification of needs (data and functionalities) is always underestimated
- the identification of an ICT strategy is a good trigger to stimulate thinking company wide
- strategic consultants never become as concrete as you would wish them to be

3.3. Set priorities and start implementing

In parallel with the ICT strategy a pilot KM project started. This covered the knowledge on our stakeholders that is all persons or organisations that have a relation with the foundation. This varies from members of the board over members of juries, to participants of colloquia and flower merchants. This subject received high priority because: it is core knowledge and complex, very different ways of working have been developed creating uncertainty over the quality of the current information, many people are implied and many double inputs and inefficiencies exist. Several workshops led to a clear proposition that is being discussed with everyone implied before implementation.

Lessons learned :

- in terms of change, the process of discussing and understanding different viewpoints during the workshops is as important as the resulting proposition
- the choice of the participants is crucial for the credibility of the project

- a facilitator, who does not bring in or know the contents, is an important help in the process

3.4. Conclusion

With the idea of knowledge management being launched, different people in house take initiatives such as creating new databases, starting up communities, ...

Essential for the knowledge manager is not to try to be the master of all KM initia-

tive. Rather, he/she should make sure to be informed and consider whether the initiative fits into the strategy and if not how it can be adapted to fit within and contribute to the realisation of the strategy.

By stimulating free initiative while channelling it, knowledge management becomes appropriated by all. While starting up step by step, we are rather confident to be on the right track and hope to increase our contribution to the welfare of society.

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