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CAPTURING THE KNOWLEDGE OF "100,000 OF THE WORLD'S BRIGHTEST PEOPLE"

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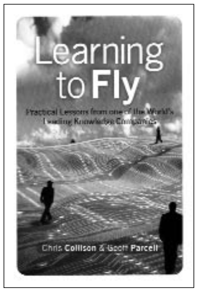

Learning to Fly: Practical Lessons from One of the World's Leading Knowledge Companies

by Chris Collison and Geoff Parcell

"Just imagine what we could achieve if we all knew what each one of us knows."

—John Browne

When Sir John Browne, CEO of oil and gas giant BP, wrote the above words, he captured the promise of knowledge management in arrestingly simple and compelling language. Imagine, indeed, what might happen if we could get inside one another's minds and tap the knowledge therein! Picture how quickly we could tackle problems and accomplish great feats, how easily we could communicate and explore ideas together, how rarely we would encounter misunderstanding and conflict.

Knowledge management—understood and practiced the right way—promises to make it all possible.

Not Information But Know-How

Yet something unfortunate has happened to the phrase "knowledge management." Too many IT-bedazzled managers believe that the expression refers to the latest information-handling technology. Worse, they assume that the technology will do all the work of knowledge management *for* them.

Knowledge management is much more than the latest software, but beyond that caveat, it has proved difficult to define.

In *Learning to Fly* (Capstone Publishing, Inc., 2001), Chris Collison and Geoff Parcell maintain that knowledge management is about capturing, creating, distilling, sharing, and using not *information* but *know-how*—the internal knowledge that each member of an organization has accumulated over time and the documented knowledge the organization has compiled. And it's not just know-how that matters—it's also know-what, know-who, know-why, and know-when.

Imagine what might happen if we could get inside one another's minds and tap the knowledge therein!

Arian Ward of Work Frontiers International offers the following perspective: "[Knowledge management's] not about creating an encyclopedia that captures everything that anybody ever knew. Rather, it's about keeping track of those who know the recipe, and nurturing the culture and the technology that will get them talking." As Collison and Parcell point out, such definitions shift the emphasis away from the creation of vast knowledge repositories and toward strategies for increasing the mobility of the knowledge that's inside people's heads. That mobility enables teams, departments, and entire organizations to constantly learn, innovate, surmount new challenges, and achieve new successes. Thus true knowledge management is more about people than anything else. It entails a range of activities, all of which organizations can practice and master.

Put another way, knowledge management is about learning *how* we learn. Information technology may indeed be fast, powerful, and impressive, but at most it merely supports true knowledge management. Companies that fail to grasp this concept risk investing in expensive IT systems—only to suffer disappointment and unnecessary expenses when the technology proves unable to "manage knowledge" for them.

BP's Road Map

Telling stories—of successes, failures, elation, and even despair—is among the most powerful of knowledge-management tools. "Here's what happened when I did X." "Here's what we learned when Y happened." "Well, it's settled: We'll never do Z again!" *Learning to Fly* tells the story of BP's journey toward learning how to "capture the knowledge of 100,000 of the world's brightest people."

But the book is more than just an interesting narration of what BP did to become a knowledge-management juggernaut. And it's far from a brag-fest. Instead, Collison and Parcell offer it as a road map for other organizations that wish to embark on the same journey.

Two longtime knowledge-management practitioners at BP, the authors not only share behind-the-scenes details from BP's experience; they also provide a wealth of hints, tips, tools, and techniques that any company can apply. As they themselves admit, "You won't find too much theory here." Rather, this is a book about what the folks at BP have practiced and what they have learned from practicing it.

In addition, Collison and Parcell set out to structure the book in a way that would help readers navigate the information in it, plot their own

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course through it, and follow whatever line of thinking they found interesting. To that end, the authors instructed their publisher to lay out the text in ways that emulate web pages. There are links between pages to allow readers to follow their train of thought to the pages containing relevant material. Alternatively, readers can work their way through the book in the more conventional, linear manner.

Finally, the authors have liberally sprinkled "facilitator's notes" throughout the book: advice from seasoned professionals on how to introduce knowledge-management practices into their own organization. They've also inserted "action zones," in which they offer readers ideas for applying their new learning to their own situations.

Clearly, this book is meant to be manhandled, scribbled in, dog-eared, and, well, *used*. At its heart, however, lie two enduring truths:

1. Successful knowledge management means learning *before, during,* and *after* everything you do.
2. Successful knowledge management hinges on a company's ability to create the kind of environment that enables people to get in touch with "those who know" and to "develop communities [of individuals] who act as guardians of the company's knowledge."

What follows is a sampling of the tools and techniques BP has used in service of these truths.

Learning *Before*: "Somebody Has Already Done It"

Learning *before* doing centers on what the authors call a "peer assist": a structured, facilitated meeting or workshop with a specific purpose, to which you ask people from other teams to come and share their experiences, insights, and knowledge with your own team.

A peer assist can have one of any number of purposes, including targeting a specific technical or commercial challenge, identifying new lines of inquiry, or simply strengthening staff networks. The key, however, is to look *across* the company's hierarchy—not up or down—to ensure the participants really are equals. As John Browne maintains, "People are much more open with their peers."

How do you select participants? Look for people who will challenge your mental models and offer fresh options and new lines of inquiry. Consider people from other disciplines, businesses, and even companies. The broader range of experiences you gain access to, the more insights into your problem you'll generate.

And how do you *find* these folks? Use these techniques:

- Look for people down the hall who are working on different projects.
- In a large company, use the firm's intranet Yellow Pages.
- In a small company, look for interested and potentially valuable outsiders —a supplier, a customer, a fellow member of a professional association.
- Post an announcement well ahead of the scheduled time for your peer assist.

Learning *During*: "Let's Stop and Reflect"

Learning *during* doing centers on holding what are normally called After Action Reviews (AARs) *while* you're conducting the work process or effort in question (for more information about the AAR process, see "Emergent Learning in Action: The After Action Review" by Charles S. Parry and Marilyn Darling, V12N8). At BP, AARs consist of an open, short (20-minute), facilitated meeting during which participants answer four simple questions:

1. What was supposed to happen?
2. What actually happened?
3. Why were there differences between our intent and reality?
4. What did we learn?

The keys to AARs? Hold them while all the participants are still present and their memories of the situation are fresh. And don't forget to record the responses to the four questions, as well as any agreed-upon actions.

Learning *After*: "What Happened and How Will We Apply It?"

Learning *after* doing focuses your attention on ways to capture and (more important) transfer lessons from a project to new challenges. To do so, the authors recommend a simple, facilitated meeting that they call a "retrospect."

More in-depth than an AAR, a retrospect is akin to conducting an analysis after a war, rather than after one of the battles. During the meeting (which should last anywhere from an hour for a simple project to two days for a complex one), you do the following:

- Revisit the objectives and deliverables of your project.
- Ask "What went well?" Then ask "Why?" several times.
- Ask "What could have gone better?" Then ask "Why?" several times.

Who should attend a retrospect? The authors recommend the project leader; key project-team members; and the customer, client, or sponsor. Most important, make sure everyone understands that the meeting's purpose is not to assign blame or praise, but to ensure that future projects go even better than this one. See that everyone has a fair share of "airtime."

Creating a Knowledge-Management Environment

Practicing learning before, during, and after a project lies at the core of knowledge management. By building the right organizational environment, you can make these practice sessions even more potent.

As a first step, make sure everyone has the tools needed to share documents and knowledge. Then, focus on encouraging new behaviors: specifically, asking for help, listening actively, challenging one another, nurturing relationships, and building trust.

These behaviors reflect new beliefs—such as "It's okay to request assistance"—that can create a sense of discomfort within some organizational climates. But by putting new behaviors into action, people can begin gradually reshaping even their deepest beliefs.

BP knows this first-hand—and has the success to prove it. ◘

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