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Rituals: The secret to effective knowledge transfer

When culture and worldviews collide, even a well-planned initiative to transfer knowledge can stall and fail in the key stages of relationship-building and information exchange.

Prof. Anca Metiu, ESSEC Business School, uses research with the farming communities of rural Ghana to highlight the role of rituals in effectively facilitating knowledge transfer.

Related research: Relational Work and the Knowledge Transfer Process: Rituals in Rural Ghana, Mira Slavova and Anca Metiu, *Organization Science*, <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2021.1441>



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THE 3 Ps IN A CoBS POD



PERCEIVE

with a set of key takeaways



PROJECT

with food for thought: on yourself, your organisation and the wider context



PERFORM

by putting it all into practice using action tips





● PERCEIVE with a set of key takeaways

- Knowledge transfer – or the transfer of knowledge – permeates the business world daily, from upskilling workforces to cross functional projects, to effectively managing international mergers and acquisitions.
- Transferring knowledge is complex: people and companies need to communicate sometimes large volumes of concrete information and facilitate this with relational work that creates links between the various participants.
- Problems can arise, and projects go askew if participants have a different worldview – a different way of seeing reality and interpreting or understanding information that can stem from their cultural or professional background, values, beliefs and assumptions.
- Research from the NGO-farmer context in Africa shows that rituals and symbolic actions can facilitate knowledge transfer. These involve paying visits, affirming values, gift-giving, praying, performing, and storytelling.
- Rituals and symbolic actions set aside differences due to opposing worldviews, provide a model for collaboration, and enable new knowledge to be presented in a way compatible with participants' worldviews.
- These discoveries hold significance not only for Western organizations operating in Africa but also for teams, projects, mergers, and acquisitions outside the continent.
- Companies are filled with rituals, which can be either negative, aimed at silencing employees, or positive, utilized to resolve conflicts, acquire new skills, and promote innovation and performance. These rituals may take various forms such as salutes, pledges, commendations, or team-building exercises, among others.



Read the full research
insight article in Global
Voice magazine #25



● **PERFORM** by putting it all into practice

CHECKLIST

- Assess company policies, practices, or rules that encourage or discourage knowledge transfer throughout the company.
- Identify and employ various *boundary objects* (ex: seating arrangements, diagrams, etc.) and *boundary-spanning agents* (ex: people who act as go-betweens, mediators, etc.) to efficiently communicate and facilitate knowledge transfer among diverse teams or departments.
- Organise a workshop session between the various stakeholders to identify their **cultural maps** and exchange worldviews. You may also like to refer to Hofstede's **Cultural onion** model.
- Set up meetings in each department to identify potential negative rituals (ex: mechanisms, organizational structures, or behaviours that restrict or silence voicing ideas and opinion) that may inhibit communication and innovation within the company. Take steps to address and replace these practices with more constructive alternatives.
- Set up a system of rituals within management. This may include paying regular visits to departments, holding meetings/workshops to affirm company values, and rewarding individual and department accomplishments.
- Set up a system of rituals within other teams that promote innovation and collaboration and allow employees to acquire new skills. These rituals can include team-building exercises, incentive programs, internal mentorship programs and cross-functional training workshops.
- Integrate storytelling into organizational practices to facilitate knowledge transfer and align diverse perspectives, particularly in contexts such as mergers and acquisitions or international collaborations.
- Schedule regular meetings to continuously assess the effectiveness of rituals in promoting knowledge transfer and organizational cohesion, and be open to adapting and refining these practices based on feedback and evolving needs.



Getting involved


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