

“There are no secrets here” – Organisational Culture, Knowledge Management and Innovation within the Queensland Music Festival

Abstract

Knowledge management is regarded as an important prerequisite for innovation and is crucial for the long-term success of any organisation (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Swan, Newell, Scarbrough, & Hislop, 1999; Carneiro, 2000); furthermore, knowledge management must include all staff members in order to build an organisational memory system which can be difficult to achieve in festival organisations due to their temporary nature (Getz, 2007). My case study of the Queensland Music Festival focuses on the organisation’s open and collaborative culture which enhances the creation and transfer of tacit knowledge among the entire staff (permanent and seasonal employees) throughout the different stages of the festival life cycle. The findings will help festival managers understand the importance of knowledge management embedded in an organisational culture that supports new ideas, knowledge creation and thus innovation.

Keywords: organisational culture; knowledge management; innovation; festival organisations

Introduction

Knowledge management is regarded as an important prerequisite for innovation and is crucial for the long-term success of any organisation (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Swan, et al., 1999; Carneiro, 2000; Donate & Guadamillas, 2011); furthermore, knowledge management must include all organisational members which can be difficult to achieve in festival organisations due to their temporary nature. If festival organisations, however, are able to make knowledge management an ongoing strategy that includes the entire team (both permanent and seasonal staff), they will be able to learn and build on what has and has not worked in the past and therefore stay innovative and competitive (Getz, 2007; Allen, O’Toole, McDonnell, & Harris, 2011). Festival managers and staff members therefore need to understand the importance of knowledge management and need to integrate it in their day-to-day practices. Furthermore, creating an open and collaborative organisational culture enhances knowledge sharing behaviour (du Plessis,

2006) and will help the festival become a learning organisation, as this study of the Queensland Music Festival has shown.

Organisational Culture, Knowledge Management and Innovation

Effective knowledge management, which includes the creation of new knowledge, the transfer of knowledge within the organisation and the embodiment of this new knowledge in products, services and systems (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), is an important requirement for both creativity and innovation (Carlsen, Andersson, Ali-Knight, Jaeger, & Taylor, 2010). Particularly the creation and transfer of tacit knowledge, that which cannot be documented or stored in databases and checklists, is vital for the success of any organisation. An open, collaborative culture can enhance the process and practices of creating and sharing this tacit knowledge (Yang, 2007). However, in festival organisations creating an organisational culture that supports knowledge management is a challenge due to their short-term, pulsating nature (Hanlon & Jago, 2009; Abfalter, Stadler, & Mueller, 2012), and because “the ideas necessary for innovation are often embodied within individuals with the creativity and skills to progress them” (Carlsen, et al., 2010, p. 123). Quite often, the artistic and executive directors are regarded as being responsible for innovation. Their individual knowledge is certainly important for the success of the organisation, however, innovation also requires the transfer and generation of collective knowledge within the entire team (Brown & Duguid, 1998; Larson, 2011). I therefore argue that innovation can only be achieved through effective knowledge management that involves *all* staff members and is supported by a collaborative organisational culture – a “knowledge culture” (McInerney, 2002, p. 1014) – in which staff members feel comfortable to contribute new ideas and insights.

The culture of an organisation including its values, norms, rituals and traditions – i.e., “the way we do things around here” (Tum, Norton, & Wright, 2006, p. 181) – needs to be shared by a majority of its members (Schein, 2004). An overarching philosophy, such as a festival vision, is equally important as a shared language and meanings, as well as implicit and unwritten rules of how things are done in the organisation that are often taken for granted (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008). From a knowledge management perspective, the culture of an organisation is an important aspect of the willingness to collaborate and share knowledge with co-workers (Schneider, Brief, & Guzzo, 1996; Schein, 2004). A collaborative culture enhances the creation of new knowledge not only across organisational boundaries but also geographical boundaries

which helps the organisation stay innovative and competitive (du Plessis, 2006). A lot of an organisation's culture, however, is learned unconsciously over time until an individual shares the underlying assumptions and taken-for-granted thoughts (Dixon, 1999; Schein, 2011). In festival organisations time is limited in order for this organisational culture to develop and for individual staff members to adopt these values and norms (Larson, 2011).

Methods

My ethnographic case study of the Queensland Music Festival, a very successful biennial music festival taking place in Brisbane and regional communities all over the state of Queensland (QMF, 2011), focuses on knowledge management practices that involve all members of the organisation. I worked together with different staff members and teams within the festival organisation between February and August 2011, and attended various meetings, workshops, rehearsals, performances and other key events throughout this time period. To explore different views on knowledge management and organisational culture three methods of data collection were used: ethnography, in-depth semi-structured interviews and textual analysis. Undertaking these three methods over a period of several months helped to track changes in the organisational culture throughout the festival life cycle (Lewis, 2003) which was essential to understanding how shared meaning was created between festival members (Benton & Craib, 2001). The field notes and interview transcripts as well as other texts and documents were analysed using NVivo and several themes around knowledge management and organisational culture were identified (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006; Bazeley, 2007).

Results

My observations and interviews revealed that QMF has managed to create an open and collaborative culture in which all festival members feel comfortable to contribute new ideas. This nurturing context is crucial for both knowledge management and innovation (Jeffcutt & Pratt, 2002; Donate & Guadamillas, 2011). Therefore, at QMF innovation is not merely the artistic and executive director's responsibility, but rather achieved through sharing knowledge among the entire team and creating new knowledge together:

I think it is a very good atmosphere, also a very empowering atmosphere in the core team, which means that (...) you can say what you think and you can possibly influence things in a way which means that you have a lot of great minds thinking alike and you

get a much better outcome. As opposed to just [them] saying “this is what you've got to do” (interview 26, 05/08/11).

At QMF, sharing information and knowledge is not one-directional or bottom-up. Rather, the executive director, artistic director and the permanent management team share information with everyone, there are no secrets being kept from seasonal staff members:

You've probably sat in and saw our conversations in the marketing room... We just yell out! (laughs) There are no secrets here! You know, I wheel back and go, “hey... what do you think about this? Let's have a chat...” And we all start talking, it's great. (...) The more people get involved, I mean someone else might have a better idea than you. So bring it on, let's all talk about it! (interview 2, 02/06/11)

At the same time, seasonal staff members and secondments are aware that they also need to share their knowledge and they are confident in suggesting new ideas. Everybody is encouraged to contribute new ideas, not only the permanent staff. This leads to cross-functional and often-times cross-boundary communication which is crucial for smooth organisational functioning, and at QMF mainly the responsibility of work groups rather than a hierarchical structure (Druskat & Wolff, 2001). Authority is thus distributed among the entire team, not used by the core team to impose their ideas upon seasonal staff members. The openness embodied by the core staff creates a friendly and supportive atmosphere and culture where seasonal staff members understand the importance of collaboration and willingly share their knowledge with each other as well as with the permanent staff. Through this process they create new knowledge together and help QMF stay innovative:

I think, what's good about the team process here is that people share ideas and knowledge and out of that process, you get these little nuggets of gold that turn into something like [our project in] Gladstone! (interview 5, 15/06/11)

Despite the pulsating nature of the festival organisation, QMF has managed to create an organisational culture that supports effective knowledge management involving all members of the staff. Particularly through collaboration with seasonal staff members new ideas can be brought in and the permanent staff can reflect upon current practices (Carlsen, et al., 2010; Larson,

2011). Seasonal staff members at the same time gain new insights from a successful festival organisation and build strong relationships with co-workers which helps them become highly sought-after professionals in their fields (Harris, 2004).

Conclusions and Implications

Effective knowledge management, as it is embodied within QMF, can enhance creativity and innovation if all members of the organisation feel comfortable to share ideas and knowledge, not merely the permanent staff. An open organisational culture enhances collaboration among the team as well as the willingness to share knowledge. At QMF, this organisational culture is recognised by the staff and maintained throughout the entire festival life cycle. The findings of my case study will help festival managers understand the importance of knowledge management embedded in an organisational culture that supports new ideas, knowledge creation and thus innovation.

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