

The Ivory Tower – a Knowledge Management Fable

The situation

Once upon a time, there was an ivory tower. In the ivory tower, there lived a community of very wise wizards. The wizards knew many things, and were proud of their knowledge and wisdom. They had a motto: “Knowledge is power.” They had spent many years studying everything in the kingdom, and knew how everything worked.

Not far from the ivory tower, there was a palace, where the king and all his courtiers lived. The king was very wise in the ways of ruling his kingdom. Around the palace were farms, rented by the serfs. The serfs farmed all the land around the kingdom. The goods produced by these farms made the kingdom wealthy.

The problem

The serfs were usually good and happy workers, but they farmed the way their fathers had always farmed, and somehow the farms did not produce as much as they remembered they used to. The rain did not fall as much as it once did; the crops and pastures were not growing as they should.

The wizards knew that the climate in the kingdom was changing. They laboured long into the nights looking for the best way to adapt the farms to the new conditions using what they already knew. They found many answers, but because the wizards seldom left the ivory tower, they could not tell the serfs that they could help.

The serfs went to the ivory tower and asked the wizards for help. The wizards told the serfs that if they came and sat on the steps of the ivory tower every day for a week, they would teach them all they needed to know to improve their farms. The serfs came, but the wizards spoke in their own arcane language, which the serfs found very hard to understand. This language was known as techknowspeak. Some words made sense to the serfs, but the wizards only spoke in very long speeches. The serfs became confused and lost in the long, complicated words and sentences. The wizards also handed out instructions carefully written out in flowing script on parchment, which the serfs found almost impossible to read.

Many serfs went back to their farms during the week, learning nothing. Those that stayed went back to their farms at the end of the week to find the land even drier, their crops dying and their animals starving. They tried to make the changes the wizards had taught them, but they did not understand enough for the changes to be effective.

Some of the serfs had found some among the wizards that they could understand more easily. These serfs went back to the ivory tower to ask more questions. However, the more often they came down from the tower to talk, the more frustrated the wizards became, because they could not do their own work.

Eventually, the serfs went to the king, complaining that their farms were suffering, and that the wizards were not doing enough to help. The wizards also complained to the King that the serfs were wasting their time and not doing enough with all the knowledge that they had carefully imparted to them.

The search for a solution

The wise king realised that he needed to act to save the kingdom. He summoned the wisest wizards, his most trustworthy courtiers and some of the best workers among the serfs. The palace troubadours also joined this council. Among the troubadours, there was a different class of people, called knowms. The council was told that the knowms had some special skills that may help solve the problem. They knew enough of techknowspeak to be able to converse with the wizards and to read and understand their parchments. They also had travelled around the land; they knew the serfs and their ways well enough to understand something of their jobs on the farms. They also knew that some of the serfs had farms that were still surviving through the hard times.

The council agreed to call together a group of knowms. They sent them out with a mission – to help the wizards and serfs work better together to improve the farms...

What do we know?

The knowms talked to their fellow troubadours, and went to the ivory tower to talk to the wizards. They asked about how the serfs normally gained their knowledge. They found out about how the itinerant troubadours travelled out to the taverns in the market towns and sang to the people. They found that the town leaders had some small libraries of parchments that the wizards provided, and that the

leaders would post notices from time to time with news for the serfs. The town criers would also announce important news around the towns. The troubadours had apprentices in the towns who would travel to the small villages and the more distant farms with news and songs.

Next, they asked the wizards to show them the new knowledge they had that could help the serfs. They carefully read through all the parchments, and spent time with each wizard, finding out what they knew of the problem with the farms.

As they spoke to each wizard, and read each scroll, they made notes in plain language of what special knowledge each wizard had, and where each relevant scroll was kept in the tower. Sometimes they would call together a gathering of the wizards, and asked more questions about what the wizards knew that could help the serfs. They also talked to some of the serfs who seemed to be surviving a little better on the land, and asked them about their farming techniques. The knowms were wise in their own ways – they understood that many of the serfs had a deep understanding of the land and the climate from their long experience farming the land. The wizards were not the only holders of knowledge.

When the knowms felt that they had searched enough of the archives and spoken to enough people to have a good idea of where the best knowledge was, they carefully completed their notes, and then went to talk to some more of the serfs.

What do the serfs need to know?

The knowms realised that some of the serfs had different needs. Some serfs mostly grew crops; others mostly grazed cattle and sheep. Some of the farms were in naturally drier, rocky ground, where others were in more swampy land near the rivers and lakes. Each area was experiencing different problems with the changes in the climate of the land.

The knowms went out to talk to the serfs, making notes of each visit. They categorised each farming area into a group, based on the type of farms and the particular needs of each type. They knew that none of the serfs needed to know the full catalogue of wisdom and knowledge that the wizards had accumulated in the Ivory Tower. On some of the larger farms, there were a number of serfs, each with their own job. The knowms asked many questions about the problems the serfs were having with their animals and their crops.

They also asked the serfs about the best way to get new information to them. Each type of farm had a different time of the year when they were busy. At other times, they would be more able to learn new things. Some of the serfs could read and write better than others.

The knowms made a list of each type of farmer, and a list of the different ways they would need to have access to the wizards' knowledge.

As they spoke to the serfs, they found that some were keen to help them assemble the wizards' knowledge. Some were also keen to help teach other serfs some of the things they had already learnt. The knowms promised them that they could help with the project, and invited them to come and meet with the wizards.

The knowms went back to the king and reported the progress they were making.

What knowledge do we use?

By now, the knowms had a good idea about the available knowledge, and the individual needs of the serfs. This was not only information from the wizards, but also from some of the serfs. They also spoke to troubadours who had travelled in other countries, and made notes of where they had learnt useful knowledge from other wizards and serfs. They now sat together and worked through their catalogues. They noted which people and other sources of information provided what the serfs needed to know.

The knowms put together a list that matched the knowledge from the wizards, the scrolls and all the other sources with the needs of each group of serfs.

How can we find out more?

When they looked at their list, the knowms realised that there were still gaps in the knowledge they needed. They called together several of the wizards, and sat down with them. The leading knowm outlined where the gaps were in their knowledge, and asked the wizards for ideas. The wizards each spoke in turn about their thoughts, while the knowms made careful notes. As more wizards spoke, some that had been silent were reminded of other information that they had forgotten. Whenever the conversation slowed down, the knowms would ask more questions to prompt the wizards.

The knowms made many notes, but at the end of their time with the wizards, there were still some questions not answered. Some of the wizards promised to go away and search further for answers. The knowms went and finished their lists of the knowledge the wizards had, the needs of the serfs, and the new knowledge that they had developed with the wizards.

How do we make all of this useful?

The knowms explained to the wizards that the serfs needed information in a way that made sense to them, rather than in techknowspeak. The wizards, as wise as they were, at first found this hard to understand. They thought that if they reduced their knowledge down to the common tongue, much would be lost. The knowms explained that even if some of the beauty of the wizards' learning may be lost, it was better for the serfs to gain the most important parts of the learning than to miss all of it.

The knowms taught the wizards a new motto: "Sharing knowledge is power." They taught them that if they recorded their knowledge in new ways that the serfs could understand, the serfs would not need to come and bother the wizards so often. It would be much easier for them to record the knowledge once. In this way, the knowms could take this knowledge to the serfs, rather than the serfs having to come to the ivory tower every time they needed help.

The knowms also called together a group of the more experienced serfs from the successful farms, and asked them more about their knowledge. They called in some of the wizards to help to collate and record this knowledge.

The knowms gave the wizards special pieces of parchment they called templates. There were several different types, for different ways of explaining the knowledge. They showed the wizards how to fill these in.

How do we arrange this and make it easy to find and use?

The next task for the knowms was to arrange all the knowledge in a way that made sense to the serfs. They decided to categorise the knowledge based on the farming seasons that each element of the knowledge related to. The knowms combined all the things that they had learnt from the wizards and from some of the serfs, and made sure that it was all in a language that the serfs could understand. They wrote a number of copies of the final product, and sorted it out into the seasonal categories. Some of the troubadours that travelled around the country were called together, and the knowms asked them to take copies of the scrolls to the major market towns, where they would be stored in the town libraries.

How do we pass this on?

The troubadours not only delivered the parchments to the libraries, but the knowms also called them together to compose new songs. The songs were written from the words in the scrolls. They composed planting songs, harvesting songs, shearing songs and milking songs – all the songs they needed to tell the serfs about the new ways of tending the land and the animals. They noted against each the time of year that it should be made available to the local communities.

When the troubadours went out to the market towns, they arranged for the town criers to announce the new scrolls that would be available in the town libraries for those who could read and write. The troubadours went to the taverns, and sang the new songs for those who wanted to listen. They taught their apprentices the songs, and sent them out to the more distant farms to teach the people the songs.

Some of the more experienced serfs were encouraged to make some time available to help on some other farms by coaching the serfs in the new ways. Notices were put up in the towns announcing times that some of the knowms would travel there to meet with the serfs to answer any questions that they still had about the new ways of farming.

How can we make the most of it?

As the seasons went by, many of the farms once again began to prosper. The knowms travelled around to monitor progress. They were happy to see the good results most of the serfs were producing, but they could also see that some were not using the new ways. Some of these were complaining about the changes imposed on them. The knowms realised that they needed to do more to encourage the use of the knowledge that they had made available – they needed to demonstrate the benefits of the new ways to the serfs.

They went to the local town leaders, and arranged for a harvest competition. All the serfs who produced the best crops and the healthiest animals would be given prizes at a gathering at the market.

They also started posting notices in the towns every time any of the serfs made any major achievements on their farms – when healthy lambs and calves were born, or good crops were growing. They did all they could to make the new ways of farming popular with all the people, and to show the benefits of changing.

How do we keep it up to date?

Even with all the success of the new farming methods, the knowms knew that things would not stay the same forever. The wizards were still doing more research and learning new things. As the serfs used the new ways, they were also learning more, and making further discoveries themselves. The knowms knew that they had to make it as easy as possible for the knowledge records to be updated, and transferred to all the people.

The knowms asked certain of the wizards whose knowledge had been recorded on master templates to take responsibility for keeping this knowledge up to date. They arranged for these wizards to have their names brought before the king, to be given appropriate honours for their work. Their templates were returned to them to be kept up-to-date with the latest learnings.

To arrange for the serfs to have access to the latest knowledge, the knowms recruited a special delivery service for the wizards to use. Each time a template was updated, the special delivery workers would take copies out to the libraries in the market towns, where the town people would help to post notices in the market. The apprentice troubadours also helped to update the songs.

How do we make the best use of our efforts?

One day, a prince from another kingdom came to visit the king. He congratulated the king on the excellent produce the farms were now delivering. While they were talking, the prince said to the king that his kingdom had fallen on hard times. The garments they were famous for weaving had always made a great deal of money for their kingdom, but somehow they were not able to produce as much as they once could. The wizards in the kingdom said that they knew about the problem, but the weavers did not seem to be able to understand.

The wise king called the chief knowm, and asked him if his team would be able to help. The knowm explained to the prince that the method they had used to improve the farms could be used to improve the weavers' work as well. The knowm said that he would need the help of the wizards in the prince's kingdom, and that they would need to appoint their own knowms to arrange for everything.

The knowm told the prince that one important step was to be sure of which learnings were the most important – there were only a few knowms in each kingdom, and a limited number of wizards and troubadours. They would need to be sure that their time was well spent. They would also need to choose which weaving centres would be the most beneficial to focus their efforts on.

The prince wanted to know more about how the program worked, so the knowm called on one of the troubadours, who had written a song about the improvement of the farms.

How do we know the effort has been worthwhile?

After the harvest season had ended, the knowms called a meeting with all the key people involved in the improvement of the farms, and asked each of them in turn how things had changed. They listened carefully, and wrote many notes. They had also been measuring the output from the farms, and knew which areas had increased output, and which had not done as well. From the serfs and town leaders in the areas that had done well, they asked about which had been most helpful – the scrolls in the library, the apprentices songs, or anything else. Where the farms had not done so well, they asked about how many people had read the scrolls, or listened to the troubadours, and why they thought things had not improved.

They put all their results together, and worked with a few of the wizards and serfs to work out where things could be done better. They carefully drew up a plan to use for the next year.

They went to the king, and showed him all the results and their plans for the future. The king was very pleased, and called a feast for all those who had done so much to make the kingdom prosperous again.