



Keeping Knowledge Off The Rocks



By: David Rymer

When I saw media coverage of the British destroyer HMS Nottingham aground on Wolf Rock two kilometres east of Lord Howe Island, I was reminded of the saying "when you find yourself in a hole, the first thing you do is stop digging!" This applies equally well to knowledge management.

The need to exploit our knowledge through continual change is a common mantra. Politicians, Chairmen, C.E.Os - even union secretaries agree on that one. After all, we live in a knowledge economy don't we? And aren't we the clever country? Queensland readers even enjoy the added advantage of living in "the Smart State".

Yet despite all the workshops and conferences on leveraging our know-how

achieving tangible, sustained change has proven to be a bit of a bugger to deliver.

Why is this? Well, with our economy leading the OECD in growth year after year, Australia's executive ranks bolstered by world class option packages lack the sense of urgency often needed to actively sponsor organisational change.

Hence, knowledge managers have learned through painful experience to look for four key preconditions for change. First is an agreed common purpose. Secondly, the presence of a sharing culture, supported by widespread identification with teams and a willingness to pull together under effective leadership. Lastly, knowledge practitioners look for a sense of urgency and commitment.

Business loves the boys own drama of war stories. Its literature is full of analogies between business leadership and military strategy. Mostly this is ego driven post-lunch bravado - a show of force in East Timor by stockbrokers armed to the teeth with laptops and mobile phones is unlikely to have impressed the pro-Jakarta militia!

However, occasionally we get a revealing glimpse into how knowledge can be practically applied to a common problem given the right mix of incentive and crisis.

When HMS Nottingham found itself on Wolf Rock, its crew faced two fundamental choices. Do they struggle to save their ship or abandon it on the rocks? (HIH board members will be familiar with this scenario).

Under Commander Richard Farrington's leadership, the first thing the crew did was to get HMS Nottingham off the rock ie. they were smart enough to stop digging when they found themselves in a hole! They accomplished this thanks to a mix of individual initiative, team commitment and the self-confidence

developed by a demanding training regime.

Faced with a stark choice between swimming and stabilising their stricken frigate, the officers and crew drew on their strong knowledge sharing culture for solutions. No knowledge hoarding, skills rationing or prima donna theatrics here! Flooded compartments were sealed off, ruptured bulkheads were braced and water was pumped into stern compartments to counter balance Nottingham's flooded bow.

The urgency of the destroyer's plight also galvanised the broader naval community into speedy action. Australian Hercules transports flew in pumps and navy divers. A New Zealand navy tanker provided fuel and fresh water to replace supplies contaminated by sea water in HMS Nottingham's flooded compartments.

As with all organisational crises, armchair experts were out in profusion after the event. Critics pointed out that HMS Nottingham shouldn't have found itself on the rock in the first place. After all, Wolf Rock is a well known shipping hazard

prominently marked on all navigation charts!

Sound familiar? Look no further than the most recent corporate failure, C.E.O./Chairman resignation or share

market collapse. Unlike his civilian counterparts, Commander Farrington focused on applying his command's collective knowledge to the problem at hand and resisted the temptation to blame his officers and crew.

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