

## REFLECTIONS

### Mentoring in knowledge management for development

*Stuart M. Belle*

Mentoring can serve as a valuable professional enhancement resource for knowledge management practitioners, particularly for those who are early career and serving in developing country contexts. Opportunities for these individuals to connect with and learn from mentors remains overlooked and under-documented, however. In this piece, I reflect on my own experience as a mentor as I filled roles guiding knowledge management and organizational learning internationally. The article opens with a reflection on my discovery of what was needed to robustly support the knowledge management function, and the call to mentor in this same vein. The essence of mentoring is described, and broadly compared to training and coaching interventions. I share lessons learned and highlights of take-aways for organizations and those who wish to strengthen knowledge management capacity. I close my reflection by concluding that mentoring is important for nurturing a professional sense of belonging and unveiling the beauty of empathy.

**Keywords:** mentoring; knowledge management for development; experiential knowledge; training; coaching; development organizations; Uganda; Ethiopia; USA

### Introduction

Dawn breaks on a new day. A new set of adventures had begun. It was the beginning of new assignments with new teams in partnership with new organizations in new country contexts.

Over a six-year time span, from 2013 to 2019, I was involved in the implementation of four novel knowledge management (KM) initiatives in Uganda, Ethiopia, and the USA. These programs were delivered by different types of organizations and through various institutional arrangements, i.e., private for-profit and private non-profit actors in partnership with a government entity, and with funding agreements implemented through both grants and contracts. These KM initiatives were exciting undertakings, both personally and professionally. They were uncharted territory, but they would be life changing.

I had cultivated a deep curiosity about how to advance knowledge management and organizational learning practice ever since my first exposure to the topic during the course of a

pre-professional internship with a non-governmental organization in 1999. Journal articles, academic conferences, and industry presentations fueled my pursuit of trying to figure out how to blend people, processes, platforms, and products in order to effectively move the best-available data to the right people in a useable format and at the optimal time. I stood in awe of how sometimes-elusive resources like information and experience could be converted into knowledge and lessons learned that had the potential to ignite very visible organizational outcomes. Now, with the new roles I had accepted, the time had come to demonstrate what was expected to be knowledge management's true value-add in achieving development impact. In fact, a knowledge management solution was proposed to have the power to change an organization's thinking and the way it worked so that tweaks in knowing would lead to shifts in doing. This was the plan and our theory on paper, anyway.

I appreciated and welcomed the significance of this work. It represented an evolution in development theory because this work meant an important adjustment in the selection and use of inputs and investments applied to address downward trends or stubbornly persistent development challenges. It represented a recognition that "good development" needed to incorporate the *how* and not just the *what*. This work signaled growing appreciation of systems thinking over silo or sectoral benchmarks. This series of assignments would invite fresh consideration of organization improvement capability above and beyond (and even as a prerequisite to) financial and material throughput capacity. This was a work of changing what was held as custom in order to change where and why we could (and should) be more confident. This work of advising on how a strategy for knowledge management should lead to activities that produce organizational learning was groundbreaking but, in many ways, undefined. Yes, there were long-term goals with accompanying results frameworks in place. Organograms mapping roles and reporting relationships existed. The directions surrounding my functions were outlined in purpose statements and related job descriptions. Something was missing, however, and more was needed.

### **The call to mentor**

As my time in-situ progressed across the six-year timeframe, I gradually became more aware of what knowledge work actually encompassed. Indeed, growing an organization (and its network of development partners) from a reactive to a proactive and even an adaptive stance demanded keen sensitivity to opportunities, risks, leverage, and perspective. Perspective!

As I became more acquainted with my teams and the questions we faced about how to sift through the complexities of mapping, moving, and measuring the contributions of explicit and tacit knowledge, the essential element of perspective kept surfacing during my own introspective after-action reviews. Being able to put things into perspective was not a skill specified in my job descriptions, but it was indispensable. The continual process of trying to put things into perspective – that is, sense-making (Maitlis and Christianson 2014) – allowed me to surface some important realizations. One realization that became clearer to me was that there was an absence in my position profile of a focus on people development. This was not a subject of

discussion during my orientations, nor was it an issue that surfaced in my annual performance appraisals. Yet, ironically, each of my immediate teams held an expectation that a significant portion of my time would be devoted to “training” them so they could better understand what the work of developing an organization’s learning capacity really entailed, and how they could succeed at the endeavor. This became more obvious and urgent as I noticed the kinds of enquiries they had about the nature our work, through the types of input they wanted me to provide as they prepared and prioritized their task-related to-do lists, and through their search to identify methodologies for stakeholder engagement and narratives that could be created in their attempts to articulate the essence of a shared experience (sense-giving) (Sonenshein 2010). Upon deeper reflection, what they were somehow referring to as training was, ultimately, a call for mentoring. What they needed from me was more than instruction; what they needed was induction.

Why were my colleagues interested in what I thought and how I felt? In what way(s) was my “other” experience viewed to be locally legitimate? What did they perceive I had to offer? How did they envision using what I could “teach” them? When did those with whom I worked so closely begin to want to see themselves as knowledge management and organizational learning professionals? You see, knowledge management and the discipline of being able to draw on collective wisdom and inclusive ways of working (Senge 2003) is being increasingly applied as a necessary input and investment in holistic, global development. Knowing and innovating capacities are settling into a more thoughtfully prominent role for informed strategizing, decision-making, and problem solving. In addition, expanding documentation of deep interdependencies between local and global environmental and human system dynamics, coupled with increasing ambiguity in unfolding and future scenarios and the leadership challenges of our day are demanding that development practitioners acquire keen capacity for diagnosis, discernment, direction-setting, and dialogue. The ability to learn and adapt through sound knowledge management must be successfully situated as an individual commitment and competency for those seeking to enable desirable change, sustainability, and flourishing on a ‘global-plus-local’ scale in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What my colleagues were seeking was not another academic degree program or certification. They had no time to comb through the year’s ‘best-selling business books’ for templates and tips. Hiring local and international consultants to coach their performance or complete “deliverables” was not how they envisioned being honed in “sensing and responding” (Haeckel 1999). What my colleagues expressed a need for – and what I have truly come to value, and upon which I now reflect - is a mutually reciprocated learning relationship that could find its place in a lived experience, through which personal capacity and professional continuity could intermingle.

### **The mentoring experience**

What I describe above expresses the essence of how I experienced the opportunity to participate in mentoring relationships, and how the call to engage in that way could be framed within a setting of strengthening knowledge management and organizational learning practice for improving development outcomes in developing country contexts. This articulation feels like it

approaches one possible definition of mentoring. My aim here, however, is not to (re)define the process of mentoring or who a mentor or mentee is (or should be). I instead hope to share what it was like to recognize such a need, and the role I was able to adopt in meeting that need. Notice too, from the preceding discussion, that I hint at mentoring's distinction from what may be labeled as training and what may be experienced as coaching. I will reserve the specifics of coaching and training modalities in efforts to build people and organization capacity for another piece. Here, as part of this reflective writing, my purpose, really, is to suggest that when you consider coaching, you will notice that it is primarily focused on strengthening a skill set whereas mentoring's purpose is to facilitate development of a perspective-rich mindset. Training is offered to help prepare participants to complete a given (set of) task(s); mentoring is designed to support those thereby engaged in their accomplishment of a purpose. Coaching and training interventions help users take competency-related or correct(ive) actions; mentoring interactions help learners take conscientious next steps on the path to providing or engaging through perspective. In simple, maybe subtle terms, coaching and training modalities can tend to approach the 'cup' as half-empty, but mentoring builds upon an orientation that appreciates an already half-full 'glass'.

When reflecting on my mentoring experiences, I notice that I am able to come away with several lessons that stand out about how I entered and navigated this space of professional and personal development. These lessons are not the kind of 'usual' notes a knowledge manager would capture about what worked and what could be improved. These particular lessons are not about change in response to an evaluation or other kind of formal feedback. They are, instead, annotations that express where I found potential for new ways to explore the content of the work of the knowledge manager, and the constructs that scaffold the process of helping organizations learn. And, the hidden but ultimately unveiled beauty of mentoring is that as a mentor, I learned these lessons in partnership with others, and not alone.

The first lesson is linked to my earlier comments about developing deeper capacity for diagnosis, discernment, direction-setting, and dialogue. With this effort, I learned that a focus on more than the use of templates or guidance notes would be most helpful for those I mentored, given the roles they filled. I learned that I needed to support their ability to understand the organizational spaces around them that depended on good knowledge management. To do this, I looked to the frameworks of methodologies that facilitated data gathering, analysis, and synthesis from qualitatively rich and dynamically emergent avenues. For instance, using the lens of ethnography (the study of culture), phenomenology (emphasizing the meaning of lived experiences), and discourse analysis (understanding the dynamics of language), I introduced those I mentored to new entry points through which they could better decipher, document, and design the knowledge management role. I recall an example of this lesson surfacing when my team in Uganda and I were designing a five-day monitoring and evaluation and learning (MEL) training for knowledge managers and M&E professionals from at least a dozen organizations. In developing the curriculum and flow of the agenda's daily details, we realized that the challenge was not a lack of content but a need to help training participants conscientiously adopt and adapt (i.e., customize) MEL principles and recommended practices into their respective organizational contexts. To do this successfully, my team had to prepare to insert themselves into the

operational reality of the learners, connecting with them, conversing with them, and counseling (sometimes comforting) them as they lead the charge of performance improvement. I needed to help my team see the ‘lay of the land’, and they in turn needed to help each learner diagnose, discern, dialogue, and set a new direction for their own organization. It was through this that I learned that my role as an effective mentor lay within supporting development of a sensitivity to subjectivity in a way that could lead to empathy.

The second lesson I learned while mentoring is the importance of nurturing not just professional capability but professional identity. One important idea behind the role of a mentor is to serve as model (an example) and a member (a representative). What this meant for me was to realize how vital it was to help foster in those I mentored a sense of belonging in a professional field and an institutional structure. For example, I recall having conversations with two knowledge management advisors who worked for different organizations but were both charged with advancing a learning agenda for their funded programs. They were both new to their role, and neither of them had previously worked as a knowledge manager. Their main concern was not about how to understand what their job description required, but how to help others in their organization (including their supervisor or project director) understand the implications of their job descriptions. They wanted to know how to help members of their team situate the knowledge management function, and what a knowledge manager needed from everyone else if their work was to yield good results. And so, as I spent time with them, I learned that the perspective I could share involved more than helping to clarify the duties outlined in a job description. As a role model and sense-giver, I was helping them to codify and convey how knowing and learning are important for an organization’s character profile, and how they may, in turn, help to model these qualities internally as a representative of the knowledge management profession within the organization, and externally as a vital member of a community of capable development practitioners. A successful knowledge manager must know there is a place for him or her.

The third lesson I want to highlight involves my own process of learning as, while mentoring, I came to terms with live expressions of knowledge management and organizational learning. The lessons I learned about modalities, motivations, and not-to-be-missed “moments in time” spurred a reflexive exercise for me that produced what I have come to articulate as fresh conceptualizations of knowledge management and organizational learning. I began to ask different questions about knowledge management, how it shows up in the life of organizations, and how we can begin to understand and appreciate its tangible as well as subtle contributions. These questions and the answers accompanying them have resulted in my efforts to express in writing what I was observing, thinking and feeling. Articles representing my articulation of these issues now reveal themselves in publications on knowledge stewardship (Belle 2015) and organizational learning as governance (Belle 2016). These products are, for me, examples of how organizational learning activities and individual learning aspirations can intersect. My mentoring experiences, therefore, have allowed me to keep learning about my own untested or even unknown assumptions about what knowledge management is really about, and for that I am grateful.



## **Mentor more**

I feel a combined sense joy and humility as I readily reflect on my mentoring experiences, now with knowledge management teams in four country settings, that I am fortunate to have been able to enrich. These experiences touch more than putting the right processes, platforms, products, and even people in place for solid knowledge management. These opportunities highlight the importance of nurturing breakthrough practices that facilitate bold purposes for organizations and their role in advancing global development. Operationalizing a real organizational commitment to knowing and learning under the gracious stewardship of knowledge managers who understand and live their calling is both bold and brilliant.

And so, it is important that knowledge and its active stewardship continue to be a vital development resource. For starters, organizations working to empower and expand promising strategies and solutions that take on the toughest development challenges must motivate and mobilize their knowledge management capacity. Intentionally including mentoring as a core facet of human resource and organization development planning is a positive way to do this. Additionally, leaders of development-minded entities should formalize expectations that knowledge management teams ought to move a level up in their approach to inquiry. For example, move past the staple “who, what, when, where, which, why, and how” inquiries, and probe more astutely by incorporating words like “since”, “supposing”, and “so that”. With these, good knowledge management can become more meaningful as it can blend with foundational questions more thoughtful claims of precedence (e.g., since we now know..., which decisions could we...?), assess links to assumption-testing (e.g., supposing we have..., what documentation process should...?), and establish maps toward desirable outcomes (e.g., so that we achieve..., how can our data...?). Therefore, a knowledge manager’s ability to combine and integrate learning is a most valuable skill as it adds importantly nuanced perspective to an organization’s learning repertoire.

A final take-away is to consider knowledge management performance outcomes that spread beyond “traditional” metrics such as number of knowledge products published, or proportion of staff contributing to and using the lessons learned database, or perceived quality of after-action reviews and other learning events, or percent decrease in decision-making time (or increase in decision quality). Instead, take up the challenge of better understanding how the knowledge management and organizational learning function contributes to institutional curiosity, hope-inspired creativity, courage, and confidence. These are, after all, some of the true drivers of success, even in global development work.

## **Conclusion**

Knowledge management is a dynamic field of practice. Technological advances and expansions in data science, automated intelligence systems, and ways to facilitate learning add to the variety of angles and entry points through which knowledge managers may support and enrich their organizations. Furthermore, knowledge management professionals are increasing their presence

and contribution to global development goals, and are doing so more and more from developing country contexts. The possibilities and potential for organizations to move and use their knowledge faster, across flatter networks, and with widening flexibility in formats are huge. What cannot be underestimated, however, is the value of a relationship through which a profession and one's place in it, and how proliferation of its values can be cornerstoned. Mentoring is a powerful induction and inclusion activity that both builds on and gives birth to powerful perspectives. My experience as a mentor has been about more than supporting personal and professional effectiveness in knowledge management for development. Above all, it's been about a healthy sense of identity and the beauty of empathy.

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## About the Author

*Stuart M. Belle* has been international development practitioner for over 20 years, with expertise in knowledge management and organizational learning. His various roles across development and emergency response programming, from both donor and implementer perspectives, have supported work in over two dozen countries. As a master designer and facilitator of adult learning and organization improvement, he draws energy from helping clients and members of his team encounter 'aha' moments. Stuart Belle remains curious about how people and organizations find meaning and is excited about developing and delivering solid solutions for converting strategy into reality. He can be reached at [2simplyknow@gmail.com](mailto:2simplyknow@gmail.com).