

TOOLS AND METHODS

What is integral knowledge management and why do we need it? How the Spiral Dynamics model can help us overcome polarized perspectives on KM within organisations

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This article proposes a novel approach to knowledge management (KM) based on the Spiral Dynamics (SD) model. It posits that some of the key challenges of KM in organisations stem from the fact that different people in organisations are operating from different worldviews and subsequently different understandings of what knowledge is and how to adequately handle it. The article first identifies five worldviews in KM: The magic view (knowledge provides identity and belonging), the hero view (knowledge is power), the absolutistic view (knowledge is order and truth), the modern view (new knowledge is the driver of success) the pluralistic view (everyone's knowledge is precious). Each worldview has its own principles, motivations, and shadow sides, and each has something to offer to support KM initiatives in different contexts. This article argues that a sixth, integral view of KM (knowledge is complex, multi-faceted and always changing) which draws on the strengths of all other worldviews can address the frictions and conflicts that often arise in organisations with diverse perspectives on KM. By embracing an integral approach, KM practitioners can create more inclusive and adaptable KM initiatives that better serve the needs of all stakeholders.

Keywords: Spiral Dynamics; Integral Theory; Integral KM; culture; socio-psychological development; psychology; organisations

Introduction

Why do organisations struggle to consistently achieve results in knowledge management (KM)? Employees in all organisations can testify to the various pain points that KM is supposed to address in organisations, and they usually acknowledge the helpfulness of some individual tools and methods. But almost all organisations struggle to put them into a coherent conceptual framework that explains when and why KM as a whole succeeds in an organisation, and when and why it doesn't. I propose that one of the key reasons for this might be the failure to adapt the type of KM approach to the values and work conditions of

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the organisations it is applied in, as well as the values and life conditions of the workers that are the target of the KM initiatives.

Whenever we ask someone in an organisation what KM is really about, we get invariably different responses. Some will emphasize the structured organisation of existing documents and information, the next one will highlight mandatory business processes, some others will talk about learning and innovation, while yet others propose it is all about free-flowing exchange among people and networks. Why this difference in responses? Because different people will have different perceptions of what ‘knowledge’ itself means to them, and therefore what ways are best suited to deal with it (aka ‘manage it’). The truth of course is that they are all partially right. But because people will answer the overarching question ‘what does *knowledge* mean to you’ based on their own value set and world view, they will focus mostly on those aspects of KM that speak to their specific needs, values and particular view of the world.

KM at different stages of socio-psychological development

This is where evolutionary models of socio-psychological development, specifically Spiral Dynamics (Graves/Beck/Cowan/Wilber) and Integral Theory (Wilber) come in. Others have already examined different socio-psychological theories that might explain knowledge behaviors before, such as ‘The human factor in knowledge management for development’ (Lammers, 2009). But little work has been done to leverage the links between Integral Theory and knowledge management, with rare exceptions like ‘Towards integral culture change initiatives to support knowledge management’ (Goodall et al, 2003). By applying the Spiral Dynamics model of stages of human development to the business discipline of knowledge management, integral knowledge management (Integral KM) fills this gap and shows under which circumstances specific KM elements, tools and methods can add value (and where they might not). This enables organisations to understand their knowledge workers better, avoid costly mistakes in the implementation of KM initiatives and, instead, assemble a portfolio of KM interventions that are suited to the environment they are applied in and the people that are supposed to apply them.

Integral knowledge management

But what does ‘integral’ mean, and what makes something integral in this context? The term ‘integral’ refers to a specific worldview in the Spiral Dynamics (SD) model developed by Don Beck and Chris Cowan in ‘Spiral Dynamics: mastering values, leadership, and change’ (Beck & Cowan, 1996) and Ken Wilber in ‘A theory of everything’ (Wilber, 2000) who were all building on the work of Clare Graves presented in ‘The futurist, human nature prepares for a momentous leap’ (Graves, 1974). For the sake of this article, we will look at six different worldviews that the Spiral Dynamics model distinguishes. (There are two more, one before

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the magic worldview, and one after the integral worldview, but they don't add much to the purpose of this specific discussion about KM.) Each worldview was assigned a color by Beck and Cowan which have no specific meaning other than to make it easier to refer to them:

1. The **magic** worldview (PURPLE) seeks to protect itself from a world that is ruled by unexplainable forces outside of its control.
2. The **hero** worldview (RED) thinks primarily in win/lose power relations
3. The **absolutistic** worldview (BLUE) champions collective rules and absolute truth
4. The **modern** worldview (ORANGE) pursues rational science, competition and personal success
5. The **pluralistic** worldview (GREEN) values community, global diversity and inclusion
6. The **integral** worldview (YELLOW) prioritizes adaptation and seeks to integrate the strengths from each of these other worldviews into an overarching systemic whole

The term 'integral' thus refers to this last worldview that looks at various historic ways of seeing the world as each holding an important piece of the puzzle without being sufficient on their own. To learn more about what the Spiral Dynamics model is about, the website of Spiral Dynamics Integral Netherlands (<https://spiraldynamicsintegral.nl/en/overview-value-systems>) is a good start. Also, Frederic Laloux explores application of Spiral Dynamics in organisational development more broadly in 'Reinventing organisations' (Laloux, 2014). So let's go through the different worldviews (also called memes or value systems in SD language) and spell out what role knowledge plays and how knowledge management as a discipline works in each of them.

PURPLE – The magic organisation

In the PURPLE worldview *knowledge provides identity and belonging*. Knowledge comes from the elders and is handed down from generation to generation in the forms of stories, rituals and practices. The ancestors are revered for their mystical powers and wisdom, and the goal is to protect this knowledge (and the rites and practices by which it is preserved) in order to ensure the safety of the social unit. Outside forces are not rationally understood, and therefore threatening, so attempts are made to establish control and a sense of safety through rituals and symbols that convey protection and meaning. Practical experiential knowledge about the ecology of one's surroundings is intertwined with mystical beliefs and practices, magic and pre-institutional religion. When applying this value set in a KM context, the knowledge organisation is looked at as a *family* that holds unique generational knowledge which protects it from the outside world. While this stage of development is most dominant in indigenous societies, we can observe some of its characteristics within our modern work environments as well. And if an organisation has employees with a strong PURPLE value set, it must cater to their needs in order to mobilize them for knowledge management.

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So how can we mobilize coworkers with their gravitational center in this worldview? We can celebrate and reaffirm the principles of the organisational founders, and derive action and policies from experiential history. Affirm the value of indigenous ecological knowledge and use it to guide practical applications that provide value to the organisation today, as examined in this journal's 'Enriching indigenous knowledge' (Shahvali, 2019). Strengthen a family-like culture among coworkers, where seasons, milestone and rites of passage are consciously and regularly celebrated, and use songs, images and physical items as symbols of organisational knowledge, identity and purpose (sports clubs among others do this very well). Coworkers with their gravitational center in PURPLE are predestined to serve as the elders, advisors or 'shamans' of the organisation, holding historical knowledge and wisdom that will prove to be of value to the next generation making the decisions.

Typical KM initiatives for PURPLE organisations are biographies, organisational histories and corporate museums, as well as any kind of storytelling that conveys meaning and wisdom, supported by rituals, practices and symbols that help anchor the experiential knowledge and insights. While stories, rituals and the reverence of founders can create a sense of identity and community, they will only get us that far in terms of dealing with practical knowledge challenges in today's organisations. The flipside of a PURPLE worldview is isolationism, aversion to outside knowledge, people or change of any sort, and a tendency to reject today's reality in favor of a frozen-in-time image of history.

RED – The hero organisation

The key knowledge principle for this worldview is *knowledge is power* wherein the world is predominantly seen as a power struggle between the strong and the weak that knows only winners and losers. Knowledge in this context becomes an instrument to increase one's sphere of influence and secure one's position vis-à-vis others. The goal is informational superiority over others in order to achieve the objectives of the in-group and to prevent the out-group from succeeding. Active disinformation and the destruction of existing knowledge or prevention of new knowledge are viable tools in order to dominate opponents. Hero figures with informational superiority or insight venture out to act on their insider knowledge in order to advance their interests and save themselves and their in-group from defeat. The knowledge organisation is looked at like a *battleship* that uses knowledge to assert its dominance and influence, and the knowledge workers in this image serve as warriors.

How to mobilize coworkers with their gravitational center in this meme? Emphasize the interest of the organisation (in-group) versus the organisation's 'enemies' (out-group), and frame KM tools as weapons to be wielded skillfully in order to advance the interests of the tribe. Let the so-called heroes in your organisation venture out to discover valuable intel that can strengthen the position of the tribe vis-à-vis others. When coworkers who are centered in RED have good communication skills, their aptitude for manipulation allows them to extract

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information where others fail, which can make them excellent investigative journalists or detectives.

Typical KM activities at this level are secretive, closed-door meetings, ideally without any written records (they could be used against you), clandestine information gathering and investigative research, withholding information as well as whistleblower protocols and source protection. The downsides to this approach to managing knowledge, however, should be obvious. Knowledge is not shared adequately, the audience that is ‘in the know’ is very small, learning is very limited, and distrust and secrecy tends to prevent productive collaboration and innovation. It is critical though that KM professionals do not dismiss the realities of power dynamics at play in organisations and communities and learn to deal with them realistically and productively, as demonstrated in this journal’s ‘Reflections on the dynamics of the coexistence of multiple knowledge cultures in a community-based maternal health project in Tanzania’ (Miltenburg et al, 2013).

BLUE – The absolutistic organisation

Within the BLUE worldview *knowledge is order and truth*. Orderly structured knowledge allows us to do the things that are right and true. The goal is to teach and affirm what is already known as the right knowledge and disseminate it to those who don’t have it so they may benefit. Knowledge is protected by authoritative gatekeepers and knowledge sharing happens on a prescriptive basis via clearly defined hierarchies and channels. New knowledge that contradicts the group’s ‘right’ knowledge will be passively resisted, purposefully hidden or actively opposed. Long-established knowledge, security of information and confidentiality trumps open knowledge sharing, freedom of thought and innovation. Explicit knowledge in documents and the collection and organisation of it, as well as its dissemination via ‘proper’ channels is heavily emphasized over tacit knowledge and unstructured exchange. The knowledge organisation is viewed as a *bureaucratic institution of doctrine* with its history and policy rulebook as its bible that should be adhered to without deviation.

How to mobilize coworkers with their gravitational center in this meme: cater to their need of security and order by establishing a set of explicit rules and guidelines for knowledge documentation and exchange. Put them in charge of meaningful archiving tasks, templates or taxonomies while keeping the regulatory burden to a minimum. Use them for KM initiatives that require executing top-down instructions and compliance, e.g. documentation for auditing purposes. For the purposes of KM, BLUE-centered coworkers’ sense of order, hierarchies and adherence to rules and processes make them excellent archivists, librarians, evaluators and compliance monitors. Typical KM initiatives that appear in BLUE organisations are document management systems and taxonomies, centralized lists and databases, editorialized knowledge repositories, archives, libraries, as well as any kind of formal templates and processes that ensure compliance with top-down rules and procedures. While the absolutistic approach to KM can cover a lot of ground in terms of managing explicit knowledge and

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necessary guidelines and prescriptions, it is not well equipped to facilitate new ideas, innovation or open exchange and discussion with different audiences. Which is where people with modern and post-modern mindsets come in.

ORANGE – The modern organisation

The key knowledge principle here is that *new knowledge is the key to success*. Within the ORANGE worldview, knowledge is empowering individuals and organisations to discover what is not yet known and to explain what is not yet understood so they can learn, grow and gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace of ideas. Scientific knowledge discovery and technological progress are the key tools, and increased efficiency, effectiveness and performance are the end goal. Proven experiential knowledge as well as academic credentials convey status, which elevates the position of individuals in their social context. The knowledge organisation is viewed as a *machine* that has knowledge as an input and organisational results as an output, with the knowledge worker taking the role of an engineer or assembly-line worker who has to make sure that knowledge is converted into results. Coworkers with their gravitational center in this worldview are motivated by status and success. To mobilize them, demonstrate how specific knowledge management activities give them as individuals as well as their organisations a competitive edge. Tie knowledge objectives to their performance scorecard and link KM activities to the strategic objectives of the organisation. Provide learning opportunities for professional development and give them channels and platforms through which they can demonstrate their knowledge and promote their status as experts in their fields. Due to their drive for discovery and progress, ORANGE coworkers can be excellent innovators in organisations, as well as intrapreneurs, technologists and researchers.

Typical KM initiatives driven by ORANGE coworkers are innovation and research efforts, learning initiatives (often in the format of one-to-many), publications that convey latest state-of-the-art knowledge, as well as any kind of technology-driven solution where technological innovation takes center stage, from data warehouse systems, office applications and web content solutions to communication systems, semantic search, social collaboration tools and artificial intelligence. However, the focus on achievement, performance and status within the ORANGE worldview also has its downsides. The mechanistic input/output view of KM doesn't do the complex reality of everyday knowledge work justice, and when everything is about goals, numbers and money, what is often lost is the one resource where knowledge comes from in the first place: The people of the organization. This is why the next worldview has an explicit people focus.

GREEN – The pluralistic organisation

For the GREEN worldview the key knowledge principle is that *all knowledge is precious and should be shared as widely as possible*. In the post-modern GREEN worldview, humans and their knowledge needs take center stage and the focus turns to implicit knowledge emerging

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though conversation, connection and collaboration. Knowledge organisations are no longer conceptualized as an engineered machine with inputs and outputs, but as a *network* where everyone engages with everyone, and which should be expanded to include ever more people. Knowledge workers are understood as networkers, facilitators and service workers. Everyone has something to share, everyone's knowledge is of equal value, and the best results are achieved through inclusive and diverse collaboration. There are no absolute truths anymore, and the paradigm of knowledge competition is replaced with the paradigm of open knowledge equity. At the organisational level, knowledge workers are trusted to identify knowledge relevant to them via decentralized and self-organized processes and exchanges, while overly rigid structures, processes and templates are rejected. At the societal level, discussions about knowledge inequalities and decolonization of knowledge come to the forefront such as in this journal's 'Creating spaces for knowledge decolonization' (Djohossou et al, 2023) as knowledge communities grapple with knowledge biases and their historical heritage from a social justice perspective and seek to 'decolonize knowledge and foster authentic community-led development [...] focusing on facilitation and co-creation' (2023: 1).

Coworkers with their gravitational center in this worldview are intrinsically motivated to connect with others, share knowledge and collaborate. For them to function most effectively, they must be given a community-driven networking and collaboration environment, ideally equipped with digital collaboration tools along with frequent opportunities of in-person exchange in the analog world. Communities of Practice and knowledge networks as introduced by Etienne Wenger in 'Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity' (Wenger, 1998) and championed among others by the UN in 'The knowledge sharing approach of the United Nations Development Programme' (Henderson, 2005), open space workshops as well as social media and corporate social networks are expressions of the style and preferences of GREEN knowledge workers. GREEN coworkers make fantastic workshop facilitators, community mobilizers/moderators and social media strategists. Learning opportunities for GREEN coworkers must be participatory and value the contributions of all present. The downsides of a KM approach that heavily emphasizes the GREEN meme can be a lack of clear structures and guidelines when they are needed. Free flowing and unstructured knowledge exchange, while being a boon to innovation and the creation of new opportunities, can become chaotic, make search for explicit materials difficult and tie up colleagues in endless discussions and get-togethers without clear outcomes. Knowledge discovery becomes a function of active networking and social interactions, which disadvantages introvert coworkers who diligently work away in their cubicles, but don't like to put themselves out there. Most of all, because all opinions are important and hierarchies are rejected, GREEN organisations have a hard time making tough executive decisions when needed.

YELLOW – The integral organisation

For the YELLOW worldview *knowledge is complex, multi-faceted and always changing*. Integral thinking understands that all the previously expressed views of knowledge and

knowledge management are, to use Ken Wilbers words, *true but partial* understandings. The goal therefore is to discern which methods, tools and practices are helpful in any particular context, and which are not, use only those that add value in a given situation, and *integrate* the various elements into something that is bigger than the sum of its parts (hence the term ‘integral’). The YELLOW worldview thinks in organizational systems in which all the previous worldviews, mechanisms and experiences are present, interconnected and mutually influencing each other, and which themselves are embedded in again larger systems of the economic, political or social sphere that it needs to navigate. Knowledge is understood as always incomplete, always fluid, always changing. However, unlike the GREEN meme, YELLOW acknowledges that not all knowledge is equal, that knowledge hierarchies do exist and have real world consequences. The knowledge organisation in this worldview is neither a family, battleship, or a bureaucracy, nor a high-achieving machine or a diverse network. Instead, it is seen as a *living organism* that integrates all those metaphors, always adapts to changing circumstances and pragmatically and flexibly does whatever it needs to in order to succeed in a particular situation. It does so by activating specific strengths of the organisation as family, battleship, bureaucracy, machine or network, whenever helpful.

Coworkers with their gravitational center in YELLOW usually do not need to be explicitly mobilized for knowledge exchange. They naturally seek out information and knowledge from different parts of the system and actively seek to disseminate it throughout the system, all while pushing for a non-ideological, integrated approach that acknowledges the different contributions and the value-add from all other modes of KM. YELLOW-centered coworkers can speak the language of colleagues at all previous memes and are suited to mobilize them by playing to their distinctive preferences and skills. They therefore can serve the organisation well as strategists, advisors, trainers and cross-organisational diplomats. KM initiatives driven by YELLOW coworkers will often apply agile development techniques, systems thinking and systemic design, complexity science (e.g. the Cynefin framework), collective intelligence and sensemaking approaches. They are an asset when working on the development of knowledge strategies, trainings, advocacy campaigns and organisational transformation projects that integrate various different elements from different development stages as needed.

Given the YELLOW worldview only emerged relatively recently (a few decades ago), its downsides are not yet fully apparent. They might materialize themselves in the long run in the form of overly heady systems and conceptual thinking and/or an over-emphasis of personal development at the expense of collective action – at which point another world view will emerge again in response. But as far as KM is concerned, we are not there yet.

Towards an integral knowledge management approach

Of course, the above is a gross oversimplification of both the SD model and the realities of KM in our organisations. Every model is wrong but some are useful, as the adage goes. And of course, no single organisation is exclusively grounded in just one specific worldview. In reality, all worldviews are present in every organisation and, in fact, every individual, and there is maybe a center of gravity around which the organisational culture revolves. However, applying the frame of this development model to KM gives us a new perspective of how to think about our corporate KM strategies and practices, and can give us a viable path forward where the discipline previously has always been stuck:

1. It explains the frictions between different people within an organisation who have vastly different ideas of what KM should focus on (e.g. BLUE's focus on explicit knowledge and closed mandatory processes vs. GREEN's focus on implicit knowledge and open exchanges)
2. It acknowledges that none of the opinions voiced about KM in an organisation are fully right or wrong, but that each of them holds partial truth and has validity within the context of the person who is expressing them. The real harm instead comes from claiming exclusivity for one's own view and pursuing a path exclusively based on one worldview (and therefore view of KM), while missing out on the strengths of all other worldviews.
3. It maps out a way how the different needs and values present in an organisation can be catered to at the same time, by avoiding a 'one-size-fits-all' strategic approach to KM and instead utilizing the strengths of different worldviews in situations where they are helpful, while unideologically setting aside those elements that do not add value in a particular situation.

A practical example: document repositories

So how might this framework be practically applied in our work? Let's take the example of document repositories, which almost every organisation is frequently struggling with. When discussing with stakeholders in our organisations which types of documents should be stored where, by whom, for what audience and what purpose, we might naturally get very different perspectives from different people:

- 'When audit asks for this document, and it is not where it is supposed to be, we are in trouble.'
- 'It should be up to the creators to decide where and how share their documents.'
- 'It must be clear who is in charge of creating this document, and retiring it again later.'
- 'Everyone should be free to create documents and share them with their intended audiences.'

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- ‘There must only be one reference instance of this, otherwise people work with the wrong version which would be a disaster.’
- ‘The more people see this content, the better. It doesn’t matter if it exists in several places at once.’
- ‘We should post only material that is validated and approved.’
- ‘It is ok if it is not authoritative content as long as it is helpful.’

Table 1: Classification of treatment of documents based from an integral lens

	Mandatory documents (<i>absolutistic</i>)	Voluntary documents (<i>pluralistic</i>)
Description	Documents that are part of a mandated process or system and must be stored in an audit-proof manner in an agreed location. The management of the document is subject to the guidelines of the organisation.	Documents that are shared with employees for the purpose of non-mandatory information, work support or learning. The management of the document is at the discretion of teams/groups within the context of community agreements.
Examples	Receipts, offers, invoices, contracts, process descriptions, mandated protocols & reports, templates, forms, policies, personnel files	Position papers, concepts, discussion papers, informally agreed protocols, case studies, lessons learned, experience reports
Who?	Process owners	Knowledge owners
For whom?	For all those involved in the process	For all those who can benefit from access to this knowledge
For what purpose?	Audit-proof storage, accountability	Learning, dissemination of knowledge
Where to store?	Document management system (DMS)	Knowledge management system / social intranet / networks

These differences in perspectives likely come – as we by now have learned – from a particular emphasis by different people on what the key purpose of knowledge and information is, and what therefore is the *right* way to deal with its artefacts. In the example above, we see a clash between an absolutistic (BLUE) view, which sees in documents primarily a means to document authoritative information and comply with mandatory processes, versus a pluralistic (GREEN) view which aims at giving people as much freedom as possible to produce, share and access documents that might be of value to anyone. And of course, both perspectives have merit in their respective context. Once we understand this underlying dynamic in the discussion, we can then frame the subject at hand in a way that speaks to the points of both perspectives.

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This is obviously again a gross simplification and leaves out a lot of the complexities of the subject of document management. The main idea here is that the lens of Integral KM helps us understand the different needs of groups in our organisation and the values behind them when it comes to specific aspects of KM. And as a result, it allows us to come up with language that makes sense to different groups at the same time, give each of them something that addresses their specific priorities, and bring them on board to our initiatives accordingly.

Conclusions

Integral KM has profound explanatory power when it comes to the frictions we experience in trying to implement KM initiatives in our organisations. It gives us a framework in which we can value different perspectives about what knowledge is and how we might best deal with it in our work environments. And it can help us integrate these different perspectives in ways that cater to seemingly opposing needs while bringing everyone on board.

Most of all, however, practicing Integral KM allows us to become conciliators in a world increasingly dominated by hardened ideological battle lines and polarized opinions. It helps us accept that every knowledge worker has a right to be where they are, and to have the needs and values they have. Our job is not to judge or to play one opinion or approach against the other, but to mitigate worldview expressions that are harmful to our communities, organisations and the world, and to integrate those elements that are healthy, useful and beneficial for all of us. This of course goes much further than the discipline of KM. But if we can contribute even a small part to this mission, we can be very proud of being part of the KM profession.

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