

Knowledge as Culture

By Olivier Serrat

Why Culture Defines Knowledge

Broadly speaking, approaches to knowledge management have followed “cognitive” and “community” (or “personalization”) models. The former, by far the most common, has relied on codification through process- and documentation-based methods for extraction, storage, and reuse of knowledge, more often than not relying on electronic repositories. The latter, courtesy of the present, welcome vogue for communities of practice and other such social networks, has shone a powerful light on the tacit dimension of knowledge and encouraged dialogue between individuals, the active agents of sense making, not between knowledge objects in a database.



Culture must not be seen as something that merely reflects an organization’s social reality: rather, it is an integral part of the process by which that reality is constructed.

Knowledge management initiatives, per se, are not culture change projects; but, if culture stands in the way of what an organization needs to do, they must somehow impact.

Redolent as they are of the chicken-and-egg dilemma,¹ both approaches, which face different opportunities and constraints and call for distinct systems of incentives, are complementary and necessary but neither has sufficiently helped. Depending on industry, sector, or market, among other determinants, some organizational cultures may be inclined to the community approach; others may be more receptive to the cognitive approach (if the cap doesn’t fit, don’t wear it). More importantly, irrespective of the approach taken, isolated knowledge management initiatives will not last: like it or not, only embedded, organization-wide activities to identify, create, store, share, and use knowledge can give knowledge management the opening it needs to pay back handsomely.

If you see in any given situation only what everybody else can see, you can be said to be so much a representative of your culture that you are a victim of it.

—Samuel Hayakawa

Organizational culture either bedevils or blesses knowledge management. Sad to say, although it is widely cited as a challenge in knowledge management initiatives, investigations seldom consider its implications for knowledge generation and sharing; fewer still examine how it influences approaches to knowledge management. Culture theory and notions of organizational configuration² are essential diagnostic lenses through

¹ Knowledge is no ordinary commodity: it is highly context dependent. If it exists principally in a milieu, when it comes to a sociology of knowledge—“knowledges” might be the better word, the knowledge in question is thus both and concurrently the cause and the effect. It is little wonder, then, that proponents of the two approaches are typically unable to juggle causality in relationships. And yet, they must.

² See Henry Mintzberg. 1989. *Mintzberg on Management: Inside Our Strange World of Organizations*. Simon and Schuster.

which to contextualize and formulate enterprise. The first aggregates the distinctive ideas, beliefs, values, and knowledge of social beings to make possible a focus on the whole and the parts, on contexts and contents, on values and value systems, and on strategic relationships between key variables. The second draws attention to the main internal and external influencers of an organization to elucidate the basic pulls on it, hence, the strengths and weaknesses of characteristic typologies.

On Organizational Culture³

“Organizational culture” is a term whose currency these days rivals that of “organizational learning.” Its study is a major constituent of organizational development—that is, the process through which an organization develops the internal capacity to be the most effective it can be in its work and to sustain itself over the long term. Organizational culture may have been forged by the founder; it may emerge over time as the organization faces challenges and obstacles; or it may be created deliberately by Management. One thing is sure: in the 21st century, a vital source of competitive advantage in successful organizations is their culture, a distinctly human product. So, what is it?

Organizational culture comprises the assumptions, values and beliefs, behaviors, artifacts, and measurements and actions of an organization, shaped by social learning, that control the way individuals and groups in the organization interact with one another and with parties outside it. Prosaically, personnel usually explain organizational culture as the way things are done in an organization—what goes and what does not. Even shorter writ might read “know how.”⁴ (To state the obvious, organizations have subcultures,⁵ which much as the overarching philosophy may not be well articulated and communicated.)

A standard typology refers to communal, networked, mercenary, and fragmented cultures.⁶ Nevertheless, the indispensable notion to grasp is that organizational culture is determined by sundry factors that find expression in organizational structure, making structure itself a chief culture-bearing mechanism.⁷

The figure below delineates 10 components that, together, influence organizational culture. Importantly, identifying discernible elements of culture allows organizations to determine features that can be managed to help implement and sustain constructive organizational change. But just as none of the 10 components in the figure shapes organizational culture on its own, none can individually support desired improvements. The art is to synergize organization, people, knowledge, and technology.⁸

If we are to achieve a richer culture, rich in contrasting values, we must recognize the whole gamut of human potentialities, and so weave a less arbitrary social fabric, one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place.

—Margaret Mead

³ This section draws from ADB. 2009. *A Primer on Organizational Culture*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/primer-organizational-culture

⁴ Logically, “know why” would equate with purpose; “know what, when, and where” would be defined by strategy. The “know who” linking strategy to purpose, aka execution, would represent the sum of policies, organization, procedures, controls, support systems, incentives, and related measurements and actions, themselves of course influenced by organizational culture.

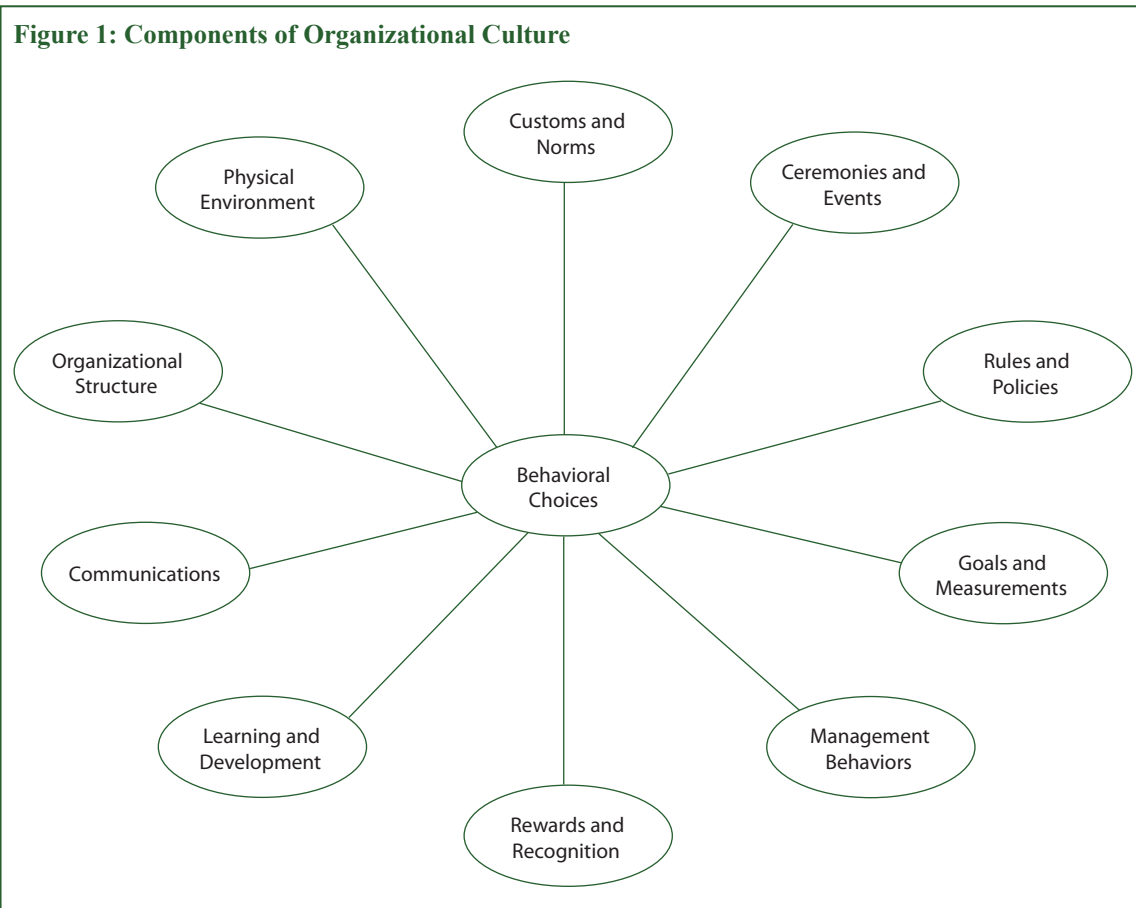
⁵ An organization is a social arrangement to pursue a collective intent. Yet, the well-known metaphor of organizational silos suggests that organizational units—and their management teams—often lack the desire or motivation to coordinate (at worst, even communicate) with other entities in the same organization. This evidences the existence of cultures whereby the incentive is to maximize the performance of the silo, not that of the organization; promoting effective cross-functional teams demands that an enabling environment be built for that.

⁶ Numerous other typologies exist. One distinguishes coercive, utilitarian, and normative organizations. (To this, others add another dimension, namely, the professional or collegial organization.) Another focuses on how power and control are delegated, with organizations labeled as autocratic, paternalistic, consultative (else democratic), participative (else power sharing), delegative, or abdlicative. A third classifies organizations according to their internal flexibility (viz., clans or hierarchies) and external outlook (viz., adhocracies or markets). The four cultures that Charles Handy popularized are power cultures (which concentrate power among a few), role cultures (which delegate authority within highly defined structures), task cultures (which form teams to solve particular problems), and people cultures (which allow individuals to think themselves superior to their organization). See Charles Handy. 1978. *Gods of Management: The Changing Work of Organizations*. Souvenir Press Ltd.

⁷ Henry Mintzberg saw seven basic configurations: (i) entrepreneurial, (ii) machine, (iii) diversified, (iv) professional, (v) innovative, (vi) missionary, and (vii) political. The truth is that one can find all these forms in any organization. Notwithstanding, approaches to knowledge management had better consider the organization in which they are to be practiced. What configuration does it have and what does that mean? What might one do to enhance the strengths and minimize the weaknesses of the structure?

⁸ ADB. 2009. *Learning for Change in ADB*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/learning-change-adb

Figure 1: Components of Organizational Culture



Source: ADB. 2008. *Auditing the Lessons Architecture*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/auditing-lessons-architecture

Organizational culture varies more than any other corporate asset, including large and tangible information and communication technology infrastructure. It is said to be strong when employees respond to stimuli because of their alignment with it. Conversely, it is said to be weak where there is little alignment, and control is exercised with administrative orders.

Regardless, if an organization is to succeed and thrive, a knowledge culture must develop to help it deal with its external environment. But organizational culture is hard to change in the best circumstances. Employees need time to get used to new ways of organizing. Defensive routines pollute the system, more often than not unwittingly—but on occasion quite deliberately, and undermine it. The dynamics of culture change must be considered an evolutionary process at individual, group, organizational, and interorganizational levels, to be facilitated by psychologically attentive leaders who do not underestimate the value of selection, socialization, and leadership. People cannot share knowledge if they do not speak a common language. And so there is a serious, oft-ignored need to root learning in human resource policies and strategies.

Organizational cultures are created by leaders, and one of the most decisive functions of leadership may well be the creation, the management, and—if and when that may become necessary—the destruction of culture.

—Edgar Schein

Observers recognize a correlation between the orientation of organizational culture and organizational learning. Indeed, the inability to change behavioral choices is repeatedly cited as the biggest hindrance to knowledge management. For this reason, even if the need to take a hard look at an organization’s culture extends the time required to prepare knowledge management initiatives, the benefits from doing so are likely to tell.

Organizations that are more successful in implementing knowledge management initiatives embody both operations- and people-oriented attributes. Typically, a learning culture is an organizational environment that values, enables, rewards, and uses the learning of its members, both individually and collectively. Learning charters may advance it.⁹ But many cultural factors inhibit knowledge transfer. The table below lists the most common sources of frictions and suggests ways to overcome them. Most importantly, when generating and sharing knowledge, the method must always suit the culture as that affects how people think, feel, and act.

Table 1: The Culture of Knowledge Transfer

Friction	Possible Solution
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of trust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build relationships and trust through face-to-face meetings.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Different cultures, vocabularies, frames of reference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create common ground through education, discussion, publications, teaming, and job rotation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of time and meeting places; narrow idea of productive work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish times and places for knowledge transfers, e.g., fairs, talk rooms, and conference reports.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Status and rewards go to knowledge owners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluate performance and provide incentives based on sharing.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of absorptive capacity in recipients 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educate employees for flexibility; provide time for learning; hire for openness to ideas.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Belief that knowledge is the prerogative of particular groups; not-invented-here syndrome 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage nonhierarchical approaches to knowledge; the quality of ideas is more important than the status of their source.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intolerance of mistakes or need for help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accept and reward creative errors and collaboration; there is no loss of status from not knowing everything.

Source: Thomas Davenport and Laurence Prusak. 2000. *Working Knowledge: How Organizations Manage What They Know*. Harvard Business School Press.

Going over the main points, knowledge management initiatives stand a greater chance of success if they spring from, advance, or at least understand the primordially of

- flat, decentralized organizational structures that leverage distributed leadership;
- measures of organizational performance;
- information and communication systems and associated technologies that provide quick, unrestricted feedback on the performance of the organization and its components;
- systems of incentives that sponsor organizational learning;
- mechanisms for surfacing and appraising implicit organizational theories of action and for cultivating systematic programs of experimental inquiry; and
- ideologies associated with mindfulness, such as openness, adaptability, flexibility, avoidance of stability traps, boundary crossing, inquiry orientation, propensity to experiment, readiness to rethink means and ends, continuous learning, excellence, total quality, realization of human potential, and creation of organizational settings as contexts for human development.

The following summarizes what actions ADB took in 2009–2011 to advance its knowledge management agenda. Their rationale owed no small debt to appreciative inquiry of ADB’s organizational configuration and culture. Their negotiated definition¹⁰ was helped by insights from psychology, sound understanding of ADB’s business processes, and earlier investigations in *Learning for Change in ADB* of 10 challenges that ADB must overcome to develop as a learning organization. To note, both explicitly and implicitly, activities were often driven by the imperative of organizational learning for change. Mixing “cognitive” and “community” tools,

⁹ See ADB. 2009. *Drawing Learning Charters*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/drawing-learning-charters

¹⁰ Key change agents (and thereafter sources of verification) included ADB’s Budget, Personnel, and Management Systems Department; Department of External Relations; Regional and Sustainable Development Department, in which the Knowledge Management Center was located; and Strategy and Policy Department.

methods, and approaches, awareness raising, communities of practice, learning and development, perceptions surveys,¹¹ reporting, and storytelling were relied upon individually and collectively to foster a stronger and more evident culture of knowledge and knowledge reputation at ADB.¹² For sure, culture must not be seen as something that merely reflects an organization's social reality: rather, it is an integral part of the process by which that reality is constructed. Integrated knowledge enterprise for identification, creation, storage, sharing, and use of knowledge would establish knowledge products and services as a central activity and key basis for ADB's development effectiveness.¹³

An immense and ever-increasing wealth of knowledge is scattered about the world today; knowledge that would probably suffice to solve all the mighty difficulties of our age, but it is dispersed and unorganized. We need a sort of mental clearinghouse for the mind: a depot where knowledge and ideas are received, sorted, summarized, digested, clarified, and compared.

—H.G. Wells

Enhancing Knowledge Management under Strategy 2020: Taking Action in ADB

Five years ago, ADB set a new strategic course to help developing member countries in Asia and the Pacific improve their living conditions and quality of life. It crafted a long-term strategic framework, 2008–2020, referred to as *Strategy 2020*,¹⁴ to serve as ADB's corporate-wide planning document and give ADB a more relevant and innovative role in shaping the region's future. *Strategy 2020* focuses ADB's support on three distinct but complementary development agendas: inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration.¹⁵ Holding that knowledge is a powerful catalyst for propelling development forward and enhancing its effects, *Strategy 2020* also underlines knowledge solutions as a driver of change, among others.¹⁶

ADB's Knowledge Strategy and Approach. The generation and sharing of knowledge have always been an essential, catalyzing element of ADB's mandate. In 2001, through its long-term strategic framework, 2001–2015,¹⁷ ADB committed to become a learning institution and a primary source of development knowledge in Asia and the Pacific. In 2004, *Knowledge Management in ADB*¹⁸ signaled ADB's intent to become a learning organization. The framework pursues two mutually supportive outcomes: (i) increased assimilation of and dissemination by ADB of relevant, high-quality knowledge to developing member countries and other stakeholders; and (ii) enhanced learning within ADB. In

¹¹ The point of a survey is to retrieve information about something in order to improve it. Perceptions surveys are important because they express the beliefs of respondents. Surveys were conducted for baselining but also to establish comparability across offices and departments for aggregated ownership through full disclosure of findings.

¹² Knowledge management initiatives, per se, are not culture change projects; but if culture stands in the way of what an organization needs to do, they must somehow impact. They can do so by helping reshape assumptions, mediating the relationships between individual and organizational knowledge, fashioning an environment for interactions that enhance the value drawn from knowledge, and refreshing an organization's outlook vis-à-vis new knowledge.

¹³ Development effectiveness is about ensuring maximum impact. ADB's corporate results framework has four levels: (i) Asia and the Pacific development outcomes—indicators track the development progress of the region through selected regional outcomes to which ADB contributes, (ii) core outputs and outcomes—indicators assess ADB's contribution to country and regional outcomes by aggregating key outputs delivered to developing member countries through ADB programs and projects, (iii) operational effectiveness—indicators aim to improve the performance of ADB's operational portfolio to increase its contribution to country outcomes and overall development effectiveness, and (iv) organizational effectiveness—indicators aim to capture progress in increasing efficiency in the use of internal resources and implementing reforms necessary to maintain ADB's ability to remain a relevant and results-oriented institution.

¹⁴ ADB. 2008. *Strategy 2020: The Long-Term Strategic Framework of the Asian Development Bank 2008–2020*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/strategy-2020-working-asia-and-pacific-free-poverty

¹⁵ It goes without saying that an organization's physical layout can conduce, or conversely discourage, a culture of knowledge. In support of *Strategy 2020*, ADB's Library decided in 2008 to develop a collaborative space for "knowledge accidents." Now branded as the knowledge hub, or kHub, it is a center where ideas are shared and built upon. *Insight Thursday*, a weekly, 30-minute seminar open to all ADB staff, has taken place there since 2010. The events bring together different groups of people and promote understanding of, organize, and manage information that is worth paying attention to—from global or regional debates to institutional challenges and more. See ADB. 2012. *Insight Thursday—Beyond the Headline*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/insight-thursday-beyond-headlines

¹⁶ ADB's proclivity to contribute and apply development knowledge owes to its role in identifying trends within and across Asia and the Pacific, interdisciplinary and integrated assistance approach, and capacity to implement insight and knowledge via large, attractive financing.

¹⁷ ADB. 2001. *Moving the Poverty Reduction Agenda Forward in Asia and the Pacific: The Long-Term Strategic Framework of the Asian Development Bank 2001–2015*. Manila. Available: www2.adb.org/documents/policies/tsf/default.asp

¹⁸ ADB. 2004. *Knowledge Management in ADB*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/knowledge-management-ADB

the context of the knowledge management framework of 2004, ADB also established a Knowledge Management Center to coordinate and monitor all knowledge initiatives as well as the action plans that constitute it. In 2008, *Strategy 2020* reinforced ADB's commitment to catalyze knowledge for

Successful knowledge transfer involves neither computers nor documents but rather interactions between people.

—Thomas Davenport

development when it urged the organization to play a bigger role in putting the potential of knowledge solutions to work in the region. That year, given disappointing progress under *Knowledge Management in ADB*, a rapid review of the knowledge management framework generated a wish list of work packages for change. The need to achieve visible gains inspired the Knowledge Management Center to formulate *Enhancing Knowledge Management under Strategy 2020, Plan of Action, 2009–2011*,¹⁹ a comprehensive set of actions/outputs—arranged in four clusters—designed to ensure that ADB's knowledge continues to expand, is practical and usable, and remains of the highest quality.²⁰ The four pillars were closely related for corporate agility: the set of actions/outputs that made up the first focused on adding value to ADB's operations in its developing member countries; the other three sets dealt with how that might be achieved. The unspoken intentions were stirring a desire for knowledge (knowledge pull) and bringing it to bear (knowledge push).

Sharpening the Knowledge Focus in ADB's Operations. ADB's unique abilities to generate, disseminate, and apply knowledge are based on three areas of comparative advantage: ADB's central position in identifying trends within and across the region; its capacity for interdisciplinary and integrated approaches; and its ability to then blend knowledge and insight with large, concessional financing. Knowledge enriches financing operations and, combined with ADB's convening power, spurs development effectiveness. Effective knowledge management can—in fact, must—help identify and put potential knowledge services and knowledge solutions to work through regional and country partnership strategies, investment programs and projects, and technical assistance and policy dialogue. Actions/outputs were proposed to sharpen the knowledge focus in ADB's operations at the regional, country, and project levels.

The store of wisdom does not consist of hard coins which keep their shape as they pass from hand to hand; it consists of ideas and doctrines whose meanings change with the minds that entertain them.

—John Plamenatz

Empowering the Communities of Practice. Communities of practice are a potential instrument through which knowledge management is implemented in ADB, ultimately to the benefit of its clients. The communities of practice keep know-how of a domain alive by sharing what they know, building on that, and adapting knowledge to specific sector and project applications. ADB introduced the concept of communities of practice in 2001, when it planned a reorganization, and refined it in 2005. Actions/outputs were proposed to ensure that communities of practice become an integral part of ADB's business processes; increase the budget of the communities of practice, based on a clear set of objectives, and, most importantly, measurable “outcomes” of improved knowledge management; require the communities of practice to more purposefully engage in external partnerships; and review the role of the knowledge management coordinators in ADB.

¹⁹ ADB. 2009. *Enhancing Knowledge Management under Strategy 2020, Plan of Action, 2009–2011*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/knowledge-management-action-plan-2009-2011

²⁰ The Knowledge Management Center was tasked with monitoring and reporting on implementation and played the lead role in delivering the actions/outputs. To this intent, it aligned its structure, recruited personnel, and designed work programs in direct relation to the four pillars of the action plan. In synergistic support of these, it also set itself annual deliverables for clarifying knowledge management and learning strategies and promoting knowledge management and learning—they included producing the *Knowledge Solutions* series, which aims to broaden ADB staff's understanding of and support for knowledge management and learning; managing the *Knowledge Showcases* series, which highlights ground-level innovative ideas; revamping the knowledge management and learning webpages at adb.org; designing and disseminating sundry awareness-raising collaterals; turning out training and instructive materials; extending advice on knowledge sharing and harvesting to offices and departments; and reaching out to external partners who can serve as knowledge resources for ADB.

Strengthening External Knowledge Partnerships. Knowledge networks facilitate information exchange toward practice-related goals. ADB will need to further augment internal knowledge sharing through communities of practice by strengthening its knowledge networking and partnerships with external institutions within and outside Asia and the Pacific. Through such external knowledge networking, ADB can share insights from its development financing practices with external partners and benefit from knowledge generated by others. Significantly, external knowledge networking enables ADB to serve one of its core roles as a multilateral development bank—to promote learning and innovation for the benefit of developing member countries. Actions/outputs were proposed to develop criteria for the selection of external knowledge networks including nonregional institutions, ensure that expected outputs and outcomes are strategically aligned to the priorities of ADB and its developing member countries, make sure that agreements with knowledge networks spell out the need to conduct proactive dissemination activities in ADB and its developing member countries, and consider knowledge partnerships when ADB enters into agreements with other institutions.

Further Enhancing Staff Learning and Skills Development. The ability of ADB and all staff to learn is a precondition to the success of *Strategy 2020*. Engaging all staff in knowledge management is crucial to generating and sharing knowledge.

I love talking about nothing. It's the only thing I know anything about.
—Oscar Wilde

Yet mainstreaming knowledge management takes time and resources. Actions/outputs were proposed to design and implement a focused (and needs-based) knowledge management and learning program for all staff; introduce

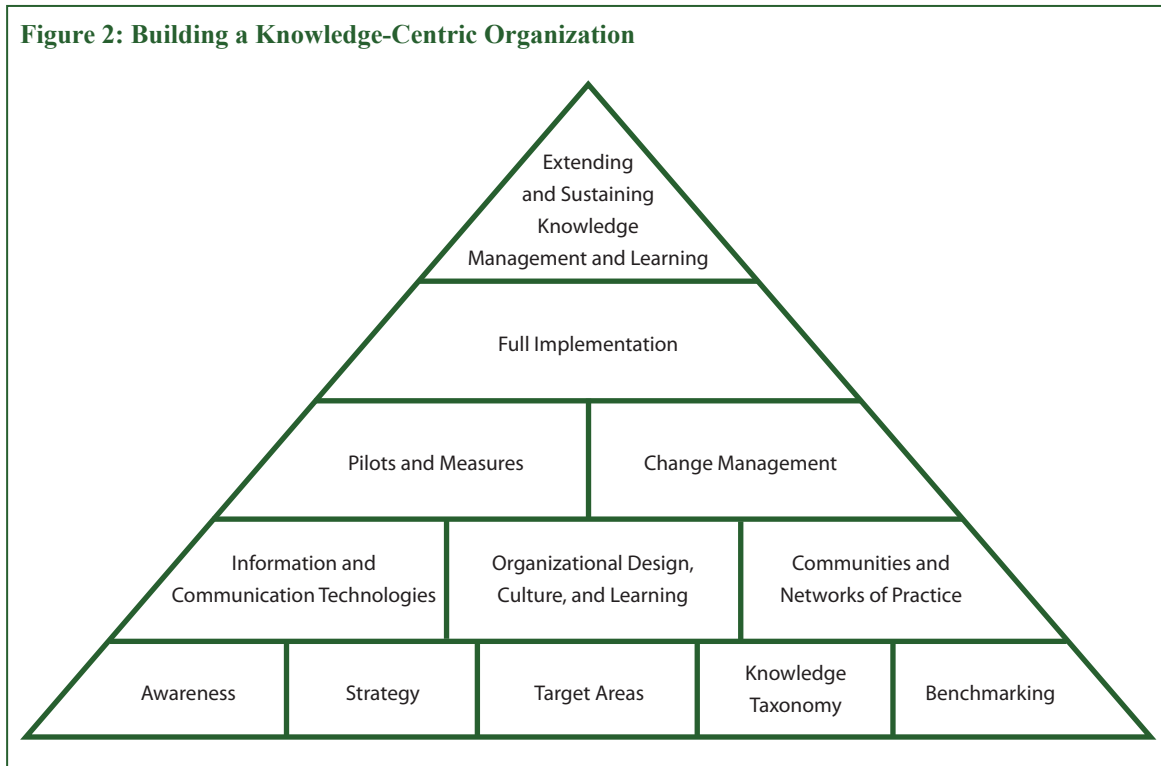
the concept of a “sabbatical” in the current “Special Leave without Pay” arrangement, according to merit and focused on results to encourage staff to compete for external learning and knowledge-sharing opportunities; invite a number of senior and junior researchers to ADB for short-term assignments in forward-looking studies; increase the budget for external training for administration by Vice-Presidents; and capture the knowledge and experience of departing staff, especially retiring members, through exit debriefings and participation in the staff induction program.

Some Knowledge Management Initiatives. To articulate and pace the initiatives of the *Action Plan for Knowledge Management, 2009–2011* as well as the Knowledge Management Center’s annual deliverables for clarifying knowledge management and learning strategies and promoting knowledge management and learning, the Knowledge Management Center drew the model of a knowledge-centric organization.²¹ Coincidentally, it reflected the five levels of knowledge management maturity specified by the Most Admired Knowledge Enterprises (MAKE) Knowledge Management Implementation Model in the context of which ADB has conducted annual MAKE surveys since 2005.²² Details of more prominent knowledge management initiatives at ADB since 2009—in terms of both results and impacts—follow with an accent on those taken to promote a culture of knowledge transfer. Their intent was to help reshape assumptions, mediate the relationships between individual and organizational knowledge, fashion an environment for interactions that enhance the value drawn from knowledge, and refresh ADB’s outlook vis-à-vis new knowledge.

²¹ ADB. 2011. *Building a Knowledge-Centric Organization*. Manila. Available: www.scribd.com/knowledge_solutions/d/86041460-building-a-knowledge-centric-organization-for-print. See also ADB. 2009. *Building a Learning Organization*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/building-learning-organization

²² ADB. 2005–. *Assessment of ADB’s Knowledge Management Implementation Framework*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/series/assessment-adbs-knowledge-management-implementation-framework. The findings of MAKE surveys are benchmarked against eight knowledge performance dimensions that measure ADB’s ability to (i) create and sustain an enterprise knowledge-driven culture; (ii) develop knowledge workers through senior management leadership; (iii) develop and deliver knowledge-based projects and/or services; (iv) manage and maximize the value of an enterprise’s intellectual capital; (v) create and sustain an enterprise-wide collaborative knowledge-sharing environment; (vi) create and sustain a learning organization; (vii) manage client knowledge to create value and enterprise intellectual capital; and (viii) transform knowledge to reduce poverty and improve clients’ standard of living. Organizations implementing knowledge strategies generally go through five stages, according to the MAKE Knowledge Management Implementation Model: (i) pre-implementation (up to 1 year), (ii) implementation (1–3 years), (iii) reinvigoration (4–6 years), (iv) inculcation (7–9 years), and (v) holistic (10+ years). The process can take anywhere from 12–15 years for nonprofit, public sector organizations (such as ADB).

Figure 2: Building a Knowledge-Centric Organization



Source: ADB. 2009. *Enhancing Knowledge Management under Strategy 2020, Plan of Action, 2009–2011*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/knowledge-management-action-plan-2009-2011

Delivering a Knowledge Management Action Plan. The *Action Plan for Knowledge Management, 2009–2011* included a knowledge management results framework: it specified expected outcomes, useful results indicators, specific activity indicators, targets, and sources of verification with which to assess and improve performance and help identify problems and their solutions; it also formed the basis for reporting. The framework helped promote a stronger culture of results and performance for knowledge management in ADB. At quarterly intervals beginning July 2009, ADB tracked with ratings the progress of the 37 action points specified in the framework.²³ The plan was successfully completed in July 2011.

I have never yet seen any plan which has not been mended by the observations of those who were much inferior in understanding to the person who took the lead in the business.

—Edmund Burke

I have always thought that one man of tolerable abilities may work great changes, and accomplish great affairs among mankind, if he first forms a good plan, and, cutting off all amusements or other employments that would divert his attention, make the execution of that same plan his sole study and business.

—Benjamin Franklin

²³ ADB. 2011. *Enhancing Knowledge Management under Strategy 2020: Plan of Action for 2009–2011—Final Report as of July 2011*. Manila. Available: www.scribd.com/knowledge_solutions/d/86865414-enhancing-knowledge-management-under-strategy-2020-plan-of-action-for-2009-2011-%E2%80%94final-report

Table 2: Highlights of ADB's Action Plan for Knowledge Management, 2009-2011

Pillar	Actions/Outputs
Sharpen the knowledge focus in ADB's operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ADB conducted studies to promote understanding of knowledge management, including (i) <i>A Survey of Demand for ADB Knowledge Products through Resident and Regional Missions</i>;^a (ii) <i>A Study of ADB's Knowledge Taxonomy</i>;^b and (iii) <i>A Study of Information on Knowledge Management and Communication in CPSs, RRP's, and TA Reports</i>.^c • The TA Strategic Forum was established in 2008 to set research and knowledge priorities in line with <i>Strategy 2020</i>. • New peer review procedures were incorporated into ADB's business processes for country partnership strategies and lending and nonlending products. A database of peer reviewers was setup. • ADB strengthened the terms of reference of the knowledge management coordinators.^d • Efforts to transform sector- and theme-related information into knowledge were boosted. • ADB's drive to broaden understanding of tools, methods, and approaches for knowledge management and learning continued through the oft-cited <i>Knowledge Solutions</i> and <i>Knowledge Showcases</i> series.^{e, f} Flash animations of a dozen <i>Knowledge Solutions</i> were produced under a new <i>Handle with Knowledge</i> series. <i>Handle with Knowledge</i> planners showcasing 54 <i>Knowledge Solutions</i> each were printed for the years 2011 and 2012. <i>Knowledge Primers</i>—briefings on knowledge management and learning applications—were attractively packaged for interactive presentation and self-learning for action • ADB published the <i>ADB Sustainable Development Timeline</i>, which catalogs major sector and thematic landmarks in ADB's journey to promote sustainable development.^g This subsequently led to the construction of an interactive multimedia platform showcasing ADB's accomplishments. • Marketing and distribution of knowledge products were expanded via Twitter, Facebook, Scribd, and Google Books.^{h, i, j} • <i>knowledge@ADB</i>, a monthly email service, and <i>Intersections</i>, a quarterly e-newsletter promoting innovative sector, thematic, and other practices in ADB's operations, were introduced. (Beginning 2012, <i>Ahead of the Curve</i> thinkpieces have been extracted from the <i>Intersections</i>.)
Empower the communities of practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ADB formulated revised guidelines for sector and thematic reporting.^k • Eight new staff positions were allocated and the budget of the communities of practice increased tenfold in 2010 with additional expense categories. • CoPs were mainstreamed into operations via (i) legitimization of their role in the peer review process for country partnership strategies and lending and nonlending operations, (ii) representation in the in-house panel for recruiting ADB international staff, and (iii) participation in midterm and annual budget review and planning exercises. • Participation in CoPs was incorporated in the 2011 performance review process for ADB staff. • CoPs conducted self-assessments and customized training programs to bridge knowledge and skills gap. • Collaboration mechanisms for cross-departmental and multidisciplinary knowledge sharing were set up, including <i>i.prompt.u</i>—a database-driven platform harvesting for wider impact the news, events, and knowledge products that individual CoPs promote—and webpages for CoPs on myADB, ADB's intranet platform. • Performance surveys of ADB-hosted CoPs were conducted.^{l, m} • A year-end event for networking and knowledge sharing among CoPs was introduced in 2009 and has been held annually thereafter. • A select set of resources in the areas of strategy development, management techniques, collaboration mechanisms, knowledge sharing and learning, and knowledge capture and storage was made available to help CoPs create value through knowledge networks.ⁿ
Strengthen external knowledge partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Guidelines for Knowledge Partnerships</i> were formulated and published.^o • A database on strategic partnerships and related agreements was created. • Knowledge management perspectives informed midterm reviews of ADB's memorandums of understanding with the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and Agence Française de Développement. • Development of a system to facilitate ADB-wide and decentralized management and monitoring of strategic partnerships was initiated. • Dissemination and visibility of ADB's knowledge products were expanded through ADB's depository library program and multi-donor public information center network.
Further enhance staff learning and skills development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Six hour-long modules for a new <i>Learning for Change Primers</i> series were developed and conducted on the subjects of (i) <i>Building a Learning Organization</i>, (ii) <i>Communities of Practice: Passing the Fitness Test</i>, (iii) <i>Designing Knowledge Partnerships Better</i>, (iv) <i>Leveraging Knowledge with ICT</i>, (v) <i>Managing Knowledge at Work</i>, and (vi) <i>Understanding Knowledge Management and Learning Essentials</i>. • Three training programs under a new <i>Knowledge Management and Learning</i> series were developed and conducted on the subjects of (i) <i>Reflective Practice</i>, (ii) <i>Learning in Teams</i>, and (iii) <i>Learning from Evaluation</i>. A fourth module on the subject of <i>Learning in Partnerships</i> was developed. • Two batches of a Narrative Practitioners training program were conducted. • The budget for external training was expanded. • Efforts to capture, store, and share the tacit knowledge of past and present staff gave birth to a publication, <i>ADB: Reflections and Beyond</i>, and an audio composition, <i>Beyond: Stories and Sounds from ADB's Region</i>.^{p, q}

CoP = community of practice, CPS = country partnership strategy, RRP = report and recommendation of the President, TA = technical assistance.

- ^a ADB. 2010. *A Survey of Demand for ADB Knowledge Products through Resident and Regional Missions*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/survey-demand-adb-knowledge-products-through-resident-and-regional-missions
- ^b ADB. 2011. *A Study of ADB's Knowledge Taxonomy*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/study-adbs-knowledge-taxonomy
- ^c ADB. 2011. *A Study of Information on Knowledge Management and Communication in CPSs, RRP, and TA Reports*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/study-information-knowledge-management-and-communication-cpps-rrps-and-ta-reports
- ^d The terms of reference are reproduced in ADB. 2010. *Enriching Knowledge Management Coordination*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/enriching-knowledge-management-coordination
- ^e ADB. 2008—. *Knowledge Solutions*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/knowledgesolutions
- ^f ADB. 2008—. *Knowledge Showcases*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/knowledgeshowcases
- ^g ADB. 2011. *ADB Sustainable Development Timeline*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/adb-sustainable-development-timeline
- ^h *Knowledge Solutions@ADBKnowledge*. Available: <http://twitter.com/#!/adbknowledge>
- ⁱ *ADB Knowledge Solutions*. Available: www.facebook.com/adbknowledgesolutions
- ^j *ADB Knowledge Solutions*. Available: www.scribd.com/knowledge_solutions
- ^k The guidelines are reproduced in ADB. 2009. *Improving Sector and Thematic Reporting*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/improving-sector-and-thematic-reporting
- ^l ADB. 2009. *Strengthening Communities of Practice in ADB*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/strengthening-communities-practice-adb
- ^m ADB. 2011. *2011 Survey of ADB-Hosted Communities of Practice*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/2011-survey-adb-hosted-communities-practice-final-report
- ⁿ ADB. 2011. *ADB Resources for Communities of Practice: Creating Value through Knowledge Networks*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/documents/adb-resources-communities-practice-creating-value-through-knowledge-networks
- ^o ADB. 2011. *Guidelines for Knowledge Partnerships*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/guidelines-knowledge-partnerships
- ^p ADB. 2010. *ADB: Reflections and Beyond*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/adb-reflections-and-beyond
- ^q ADB. 2010. *Beyond: Stories and Sounds from ADB's Region*. Manila. Available: www2.adb.org/documents/multimedia/beyond-stories-sounds-from-adb/default.asp

Source: Author.

Growing Communities of Practice. Arguably, ADB accomplished most under the second of the four pillars, aimed at empowering the communities of practice. Communities of practice²⁴ gather people who share a common passion for something they do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better. They are peer-to-peer collaborative networks driven by the willingness of their members to share work-related knowledge, further develop expertise, and solve problems in a specific domain. They enhance learning and empower people in their work. What is more, the simple act of joining and being regularly involved in organized groups significantly impacts individual health and well-being. The unambiguous “community” dimension of the actions/ outputs executed under the *Action Plan for Knowledge Management, 2009–2011* portends well for ADB’s organizational culture. The short-term and long-term value they can add is considerable.²⁵

We don't accomplish anything in this world alone ... and whatever happens is the result of the whole tapestry of one's life and all the weavings of individual threads from one to another that creates something.

—Sandra Day O'Connor

²⁴ See ADB. 2011. *Communities of Practice 101*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/communities-practice-101

²⁵ The short-term value a community of practice brings to members includes (i) help with challenges, (ii) access to expertise, (iii) confidence, (iv) fun with colleagues, and (v) meaningful work. The short-term value it brings to the organization comprises (i) problem solving, (ii) time saving, (iii) knowledge sharing, (iv) synergies across units, and (v) reuse of resources. The long-term value to members includes (i) personal development, (ii) reputation, (iii) professional identity, (iv) collaborative advantage, and (v) marketability. The long-term value to the organization comprises (i) strategic capabilities, (ii) keeping abreast, (iii) innovation, (iv) retention of talent, and (v) new strategies.

Box 1: Empowering ADB-Hosted Communities of Practice

- Communities of practice are groups of people who share a passion for something they know how to do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better.
- Appearing in 2002 after a bank-wide reorganization, ADB-hosted CoPs were empowered under the *Action Plan for Knowledge Management, 2009–2011*.
- Interventions ranging from budget increases to integration in ADB operations have helped affirm CoPs as the heart and soul of knowledge generation and sharing in ADB.

Background

Professionals working in a particular field often converge, hoping thereby to both impart and enrich their knowledge. This is also true of ADB staff.

First CoPs. Informal peer groups emerged in ADB in the 1990s but only in 2002 did they find their footing in ADB’s organizational structure. That year saw the birth of 19 sector and thematic networks intended to promote cross-fertilization of knowledge across departments. However, in the first few years of their existence, the committees and networks were hampered by many factors, which included the following:

- Nonvoluntary membership—departments nominated staff and required them to devote 15% of their time to the networks.
- Mixed responsibilities—the networks not only provided think-tank type services in their respective fields but also performed executive functions such as trust fund management.
- Weak committee chairmanship—even though they were not recognized champions in their field, staff were sometimes appointed as committee chairs.
- Inadequate resourcing—the networks were not given adequate budgets and the work of members was not recognized in staff performance reviews.

The community stagnates without the impulse of the individual. The impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community.
—William James

In 2005, the recommendations of an independent panel commissioned to assess the effectiveness of ADB’s reorganization prompted a consolidation of the networks. Their number was reduced to 10, and the term “community of practice” or CoP entered the picture.

Reconstituted CoPs. The new batch of CoPs fared better. Membership became voluntary, chairmanship of committees was based on technical expertise, and their functions focused mainly on sector and thematic work. Naturally, the 10 CoPs progressed at different speeds, and the more sophisticated among them began to feed into debates on sector or thematic directions, offer advice on staff skills mix and competencies, and conduct activities on knowledge generation and sharing. The CoPs as a group also started receiving an annual budget of \$100,000, shared equally among them and spent on strategy review activities, conference participation, and conduct of studies. A 2008 review of the CoPs revealed that they had travelled far, but not far enough. Clearer roles and responsibilities vis-à-vis ADB’s operations were called for. Interchangeable use of the terms “committees,” “networks,” and “CoPs” had led to considerable confusion about the meaning of each. Resources were still meager. Things turned for the better, and at a much faster rate, when the empowerment of CoPs was specified as a pillar of the *Action Plan for Knowledge Management, 2009–2011*.

Approach

In July 2009, ADB President Haruhiko Kuroda approved the *Action Plan for Knowledge Management, 2009–2011* to ensure that ADB’s knowledge remains of the highest quality and relevance. The action plan committed results in four pillars:

- Sharpening the knowledge focus in ADB’s operations
- Empowering the communities of practice
- Strengthening external knowledge partnerships
- Further enhancing staff learning and skills development

Box 1 *continued*

The second pillar highlighted CoPs as an instrument to promote knowledge generation and sharing in ADB. To set a benchmark for the coming years, ADB surveyed the performance of CoPs in 2009. This first survey revealed that CoPs helped build relationships and benefited daily work. However, they also needed to reach out to all members, especially those in ADB’s resident missions and representative offices; align their work programs with *Strategy 2020*, ADB’s long-term strategic framework; and concretize their roles in reviewing country partnership strategies and lending and nonlending products.

To address the survey’s recommendations, ADB took steps to boost CoP effectiveness. The main interventions were:

- **Higher budgets.** In 2010, individual CoP budgets rose from about \$10,000 to roughly \$100,000. (They would increase further in 2012.)
- **Streamlined guidelines for sector and thematic reporting.** Detailed guidelines formalized the feedback process of CoPs to inform ADB’s annual *Development Effectiveness Review* and work program and budget frameworks.
- **New peer review guidelines.** The guidelines legitimized the CoPs’ participation in the peer review process and enabled country partnership strategies and lending and nonlending products to benefit from the operations-based inputs of CoP members.
- **CoP work in performance reviews.** ADB’s staff performance review templates were modified to incorporate knowledge work. Beginning 2011, CoPs also have the opportunity to provide performance feedback about a staff as an “input supervisor.”
- **CoPs as partners in recruitment.** Acknowledging that subject matter experts in CoPs best understand what skills are needed in their field, ADB has, since mid-2010, arranged for CoP chairs, co-chairs, and practice leaders to participate in screening and interviewing prospective international staff.

Results

Between 2005 and 2011, four more CoPs were established, bringing the total number of ADB-hosted CoPs to 14. Over the 2 years of action plan implementation, CoPs demonstrated they have become the heart and soul of knowledge generation and sharing in ADB.

Strengthening internal relationships. Since late 2009, the number of collaborative initiatives between and among CoPs have been increasing. They include joint knowledge-sharing events and joint knowledge products. At year-end gatherings, begun in 2009, CoPs highlight their accomplishments, exchange lessons, and explore areas of collaboration. (The year-end gathering of 2011 would have them share lessons learned with one another.)

Building knowledge and expertise. CoPs now help prepare key ADB documents such as the operational plans for education, food security, transport, and water. In support, regional sector studies build the knowledge and expertise of their members. The CoPs themselves have also taken an active role in developing the technical capacity of members by conducting or arranging training courses tailor-made for them.

Expanding outreach. Outreach to stakeholders has greatly improved with CoP members providing advice on projects managed by their peers. CoPs have also forged stronger links with ADB’s development partners and stakeholders by acting as technical experts and focal points on key issues. Moreover, they have shared good-practice studies on education, tool kits for urban transport development, e-newsletters and video documentaries on water, and other engaging and creative materials.

A community is like a ship; everyone ought to be prepared to take the helm.

—Henrik Ibsen

The second survey of CoPs, undertaken in 2011, revealed considerable improvements across the board. Naturally, challenges persist. For example, CoPs might need to crystallize their functions better around filtering, amplifying, investing and providing, convening, community building, and learning and

Box 1 *continued*

facilitating. CoPs can carry out several of these functions simultaneously but there are trade-offs: each function requires specific capacities, skills, resources, and systems. Overlooking trade-offs can drive CoPs away from their original role. Nevertheless, however they develop, CoPs will need ADB’s continued support; the potential from their activities is just too great. They can more decidedly

- Promote innovative approaches to address specific development challenges.
- Develop, capture, and transfer good practices on specific topics by stimulating the active generation and sharing of knowledge.

Without a sense of caring, there can be no sense of community.
—Anthony Burgess

- Link diverse groups of practitioners from different disciplines and be thus intertwined in ADB’s organizational structure.

- Serve as an ongoing learning venue for staff (and outside practitioners) who share similar goals, interests, problems, and approaches.
- Respond rapidly to individual inquiries from members and ADB clients, audiences, and partners with specific answers.

Source: Extracted from ADB. 2011. *Empowering ADB-Hosted Communities of Practice*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/empowering-adb-hosted-communities-practice

Box 2: ADB-Hosted Communities of Practice—Driving Knowledge Activities

- Communities of practice are a prime tool of organizational development.
- Empowering CoPs was one of the four pillars of *Enhancing Knowledge Management under Strategy 2020: Plan of Action, 2009–2011*.
- Since 2009, fast advances in core knowledge activities instituted ADB-hosted communities of practice as the heart and soul of knowledge generation and sharing in the organization.

Empowering ADB-Hosted Communities of Practice

At the 42nd Annual Meeting of the Board of Governors of ADB held in 2009, President Haruhiko Kuroda stressed the importance of knowledge to the organization: *“To be fully effective, we must also consciously and actively blend knowledge with financing. We will focus on developing, capturing, and sharing knowledge in all our work, ensuring that ADB serves an intermediary role for both financing and knowledge.”*

Three months later, President Kuroda approved *Enhancing Knowledge Management under Strategy 2020: Plan of Action, 2009–2011* to advance the knowledge management agenda in ADB. Four pillars framed the plan: (i) sharpening the knowledge focus in ADB’s operations, (ii) empowering CoP,^a (iii) strengthening external knowledge partnerships, and (iv) further enhancing staff learning and skills development.

Tacit knowledge,^b specifically how to access and share it, offers a particularly complex challenge in pursuing any knowledge agenda; it needs special methods to transmit it. Therefore, the second pillar of the action plan emphasizes CoPs as a collaboration mechanism to generate and share knowledge.

CoPs were first introduced in 2002 during an ADB-wide reorganization. However, in the years after the action plan was introduced, they have grown swiftly as centers of expertise. Since 2009, they have variously enriched knowledge of sector and thematic issues, informed country partnership strategies and lending and nonlending operations, and contributed to human resource development and management ADB-wide. What is more, CoPs empower people in their work: the simple act of joining and being regularly involved in such organized groups has significantly impacted individual well-being among ADB personnel.

It is vain to talk of the interest of the community, without understanding what is the interest of the individual.
—Jeremy Bentham

Delivering Core Knowledge Activities

To excel in their respective domains, ADB-hosted CoPs aim to identify, create, store, share, and use knowledge. All these are core knowledge activities that learning organizations align or integrate into business

Box 2 *continued*

processes and balance according to the specificities of each. Since 2009, annual and triennial reports have helped define work programs and report on accomplishments in these areas.

Identifying knowledge. Many CoPs now conduct surveys or interviews to help determine the knowledge products and services their members can create or improve on. Examples include the *Water CoP Perceptions* survey and *The Philippines Environment and Natural Resources Country Assessment: “A Call to Action.”* In 2009, ADB’s Knowledge Management Center also introduced a biennial survey of ADB-hosted CoPs to help them assess performance and identify means to reach optimal levels.

Creating knowledge. Many CoPs have published and produced documentaries to showcase initiatives, programs, and activities. The Water CoP, for instance, has pioneered the *Water for All* series. The Education CoP has launched the *Focus on Education* series. The Environment CoP helped articulate Asia’s voice in preparing for the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development or Rio + 20 through the report *Green Growth, Resources, and Resilience*.

Storing knowledge. ADB-hosted CoPs have become ubiquitous, thanks to the myriad means for knowledge capture and storage the digital world now offers. Because perceptions of information overload have less to do with quantity than with the quality by which knowledge is presented, many CoPs craft products that highlight achievements and outcomes. The material is stored for ready access through multiple platforms including the CoP webpages in ADB’s internal and external sites. eStar, an electronic storage and retrieval system, is now also used to store publications. Some CoPs, such as that for transport, also use YouTube to upload video footage.

Sharing knowledge. ADB-hosted CoPs bring a focus to bear on knowledge sharing through peer reviews, notably of country partnership strategies and lending and nonlending operations;^c customized in-house and external training of members; regular meetings, seminars, conferences, and forums;^d external knowledge partnerships; etc. These activities are not just an add-on; they are becoming integral part of daily work.

CoPs extensively use information and communication technology in support of knowledge sharing. Knowledge databases, discussion boards, blogs, and webpages were developed for this. The focus of webpages such as the Energy CoP’s *ENERcall* at <http://enercall/> and the Urban CoP’s *UrbInfo* at <http://urbinfo/> remains internal but the applications are mobile and provide cumulative data and information anywhere, anytime.

A monthly internal e-newsletter dedicated to CoPs, *i.prompt.u*, was introduced by the Knowledge Management Center in 2011 to expand knowledge sharing within and outside ADB. It serves to aggregate information from contributors to enhance relationship building and networking. Specifically, *i.prompt.u* highlights knowledge products, events, and news of CoPs; links to individual newsletters^e of CoPs; showcases annual and triennial reports of CoPs; fosters inter-CoP collaboration and cross-fertilization through rich exchange of information; and advances interest in multiple domains.

Using knowledge. ADB-hosted CoPs also draft operational plans in sector and thematic areas to refine the strategic directions that *Strategy 2020* laid out. The purpose of the plans is to review experiences and past practices, assess broader development issues and challenges, and identify short- to medium-term approaches and activities needed to act on ADB’s strategic thrusts. In 2009, ADB completed an operational plan for sustainable food security. A year later, ADB approved three more plans for climate change, sustainable transport, and education; another on finance was approved in 2011.

Achieving Full Potential

ADB recognizes the potential that CoPs hold in support of *Strategy 2020*. To help CoPs reach optimal performance, ADB has since 2009 conducted biennial surveys in eight areas of inquiry:

The man who does not take pride in his own performance performs nothing in which to take pride.

—Thomas J. Watson

- The extent of participation in CoPs
- Insights into the clarity of domains
- Perceptions of the value-added by CoPs
- Critical success factors

Box 2 *continued*

- Insights into the varying possible functions of CoPs
- Dimensions of participation in CoPs
- Perceptions of ADB’s approach to CoPs
- Recommendations to strengthen CoP effectiveness

The results of the 2011 *Survey of ADB-Hosted Communities of Practice* suggest that ADB is reaping the benefits of investments and hard work over the last 2 years. With greater cross-fertilization among CoPs, initiated in 2009 with the first year-end gathering of CoPs, the value that this prime tool of organizational development brings to ADB’s core business can only increase. CoPs, now considered the “heart and soul” of knowledge sharing in ADB, are gaining vigor.

- ^a Following ADB’s reorganization in 2001, which introduced the concept of networks, 15 CoPs are now active: Agriculture, Rural Development, and Food Security; Education; Energy; Environment; Financial Sector Development; Gender Equity; Governance and Public Management; Health; Public–Private Partnerships; Regional Cooperation and Integration; Social Development and Poverty; Transport; Urban; and Water. (The latest, a CoP on Operations, was established in 2012 to help address ADB-wide project and portfolio management issues.) See ADB. 2011. *Timeline of ADB-Hosted Communities of Practice*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/timeline-adb-hosted-communities-practice
- ^b Tacit knowledge is personal, context-specific knowledge that is difficult to formalize, record, or articulate: it is stored in the heads of people. It is mainly developed through interaction, debate, and trial and error encountered in practice.
- ^c CoPs are now also being requested to provide quality-at-entry and quality-at-exit reviews of key publications of ADB’s operations departments.
- ^d The CoPs that helped shape knowledge generation and sharing through forums are the Agriculture, Rural Development, and Food Security (2010); Education (2004); Transport (2008, 2010, 2012); Urban (2011); and Water (2006–2011) communities
- ^e CoPs with individual newsletters include Gender Equity, Health, Social Development and Poverty, Transport, and Water.

Source: Extracted from ADB. 2011. *ADB-Hosted Communities of Practice—Driving Knowledge Activities*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/adb-hosted-communities-practice-driving-knowledge-activities

Cultivating Reflective Practice. People are wired to tell and listen to stories. Yet institutions have largely ignored the power of storytelling in favor of official reports, formal speeches, and press releases. In 2008, ADB began to explore storytelling as a medium to capture, store, and share its past and present staff’s vast knowledge.

The first product, the publication *ADB: Reflections and Beyond*, was an introspective look at ADB over 4 decades of development work, culled from the memories of past and present, senior and junior, and local and international staff. Often called the “Yellow Book,” this publication is the result of painstaking efforts—conducting over 40 interviews, trawling through the voluminous materials produced, and transforming the spoken words into written language without losing their spontaneity, essence, or appeal.

Reactions to the Yellow Book were overwhelmingly positive. Contrasting sharply with the dominant tone and style of ADB’s usual

products, the book adopted an easy-reading approach that made ADB’s rich history doubly interesting. Readers pored over their copies and asked when the next volume would be released. The next volume, as it turned out, came in a hugely different format.

Action and faith enslave thought, both of them in order not be troubled or inconvenienced by reflection, criticism, and doubt.
—Henri-Frédéric Amiel

Concerned with giving staff a more dynamic walk down “memory lane,” ADB designed an interactive multimedia documentary, powered by a Flash-based application, that would allow users to browse through ADB’s experiences using various entry points, e.g., subjects, years, decades, ADB presidents, etc. The product, currently nearing completion, is anchored by four timelines: the *ADB Sustainable Development Timeline*, a *World Sustainable Development Timeline*, ADB historical milestones, and a *Timeline of ADB-Hosted Communities of Practice*. The addition to ADB’s living archive was launched in December 2011 on the occasion of the organization’s 44th anniversary.

Box 3: Building Narrative Capacity at ADB

- ADB makes growing use of knowledge management tools, methods, and approaches but must better capture and store its wealth of tacit knowledge.
- In 2009, the Knowledge Management Center in ADB's Regional and Sustainable Development Department launched an oral history project to help ADB hear itself.
- ADB staff expressed deep appreciation for *ADB: Reflections and Beyond* and its companion audio composition, *Beyond: Stories and Sounds from ADB's Region*—ADB has developed an appetite for storytelling in various contexts and applications.

Origins

ADB has insufficient means of capturing and storing its vast wealth of tacit experience. Coaching and mentoring are somewhat ad hoc; exit interviews are still cursory; the Critical Incident technique finds few applications; structured peer assists have not yet been introduced; knowledge harvesting is not practiced; after-action reviews and retrospects are more or less unheard of; and only a small number of weblogs exists. In short, knowledge sharing is limited to small (but rapidly expanding) communities and networks of practice, meetings over coffee, or occasional exchanges in hallways. A particular concern is that senior staff do not often transfer their experience with audiences outside Management circles.

ADB is both a repository of stories waiting to be told and an audience ready to listen. At the 2007 annual meeting of the Knowledge Management for Development community, Olivier Serrat, the future head of the Knowledge Management Center in ADB, learned of a storytelling project of the Islamic Development Bank conducted in 2006 because many of that organization's staff were about to retire. Upon joining the Knowledge Management Center in September 2008, he formulated an oral history project to create a means by which ADB might hear itself and learn from past and present experience.

*It is not part of a true culture to tame tigers,
any more than it is to make sheep ferocious.*

—Henry David Thoreau

Storytelling would surely help ADB become a learning organization as envisaged in *Strategy 2020*, ADB's long-term strategic framework. In October 2008, the Knowledge Management Center decided to test ADB's appetite for storytelling. A scoping exercise soon confirmed that staff were ready and willing

to share their experiences with narrative techniques. According to an early participant, "It's easier to talk about the future if you ground it in the events of the past."

Listening to ADB Through Stories

In March 2009, long tables covered with blank sheets were laid out in ADB's Library, inviting staff to jot down significant memories and mark out ADB's crossroads over the years. With some difficulty at the start, a timeline of ADB's history, born of staff reminiscences, emerged. It articulated a healthy blend of recollections—some fundamental, others more subtle. It became the basis for the structure of *ADB: Reflections and Beyond*. Accordingly, that would intersperse reminiscences of arrivals and early years, descriptions of ADB projects and day-to-day operations, reports of complex situations and tricky judgment calls, etc. with personal memories of colleagues.

Interviews with alumni, Management, and staff provided the most trying yet fulfilling moments. Storytelling was still new to ADB, even though some had used it in projects. The Knowledge Management Center initially identified over 40 interviewees—a judicious mix of senior and junior international and local staff, alumni, and former members of the Board of Directors and Management. "I heard a story about something you did 15 years ago. Can you tell me more?" Some interviewees declined the invitation to take part. Others said they could only spare 30 minutes but reminisced for more than 2.5 hours. A few were eager to be interviewed but hesitated—they felt they were not senior enough. Two quickly said that interviews can preserve institutional memory and requested follow-up sessions.

The book *ADB: Reflections and Beyond* is one of many fruits from the interviews. A companion audio composition, *Beyond: Stories and Sounds from ADB's Region*, selects pearls of wisdom, artistically allied to

Box 3 *continued*

sounds captured in headquarters and the field, in the form of podcasts.

Poring over the material yielded by 33 interviews and making selections for the publication was not easy. But the greater challenge lay in transcribing spoken words into written language without losing vivacity. Dealing with these difficulties occupied the Knowledge Management Center in the second half of 2009.

ADB: Reflections and Beyond was printed in January 2010. But, there was still a sense of uncertainty stemming from concerns over how the book should be launched, how staff would react to it, and what unintended effects it might have. Eventually, what became known as the “Yellow Book” was released on 2 February 2010, coinciding with ADB President Haruhiko Kuroda’s town hall presentation of ADB’s *Our People Strategy*, a document that sets out the principles for how the organization will recruit, motivate, and manage its workforce to achieve the operational and institutional goals of *Strategy 2020*. The limited number of copies of the book placed on display at the launch were snapped up by staff as they arrived. Every staff member received a copy of the book the following day. *ADB: Reflections and Beyond* is now given to each prospective staff.

Appreciation and Follow-up

Reactions to the book were overwhelmingly positive. During the town hall meeting, staff who held advance copies began to flick through the book. Reactions ranged from surprise to amusement to delight. A department head later asked: “Are you the guys behind the Yellow Book? When is the next volume coming out?”

ADB: Reflections and Beyond and *Beyond: Stories and Sounds from ADB’s Region* succeeded in connecting staff with ADB’s very rich history. They contrast sharply with the authoritative, yet distant voice of traditional ADB products. The book is refreshingly different, “... a bit on the light side, which is fine, but future stories can go deeper.”

There is something to be said for positive deviance. As is the case for many radical innovation projects, starting small and flying below the radar helped get things done. Once personnel see, recognize, and understand the benefits of approaches such as storytelling (especially when products begin to take shape), demand for related initiatives typically increases. Other departments are beginning to use the technique for training purposes. For example, storytelling is being used to develop a source book for country directors.

As a postscript, the Knowledge Management Center later asked the interviewees how narrative techniques might be applied elsewhere. One suggested that ADB should consider capturing stories from its audiences, clients, and partners. Their feedback might feature people who helped shape the evolution of ADB’s development work across Asia and the Pacific.

Culture is not made up but something that evolves which is human.

—Edward T. Hall

Source: Extracted from ADB. 2010. *Building Narrative Capacity at ADB*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/building-narrative-capacity-adb

Box 4: Interactive Stories of Sustainable Development

- In early 2009, ADB embarked on a first organization-wide knowledge-harvesting exercise to collect a blend of recollections and reminiscences through storytelling. It gave birth to two much-appreciated contributions that stimulated in-house appetite for use of narrative techniques in various contexts and applications.
- In late 2010, a follow-up interactive, audiovisual project was conceptualized to promulgate further the use of storytelling to elicit, capture, store, and share knowledge.
- The potential of the new multimedia platform to energize staff recruitment, induction, and training; add color to conferences and other events; enrich education; and boost ADB’s profile externally was immediately recognized.

Setting

In March 2009, long tables covered with blank sheets were laid out in ADB’s library, beckoning staff to

Box 4 *continued*

record special memories and mark out ADB's crossroads over the years. The intention was to (i) draw out and package tacit knowledge of struggles and triumphs working for development in the Asia and Pacific region, and ADB's evolution as an institution, to help others adapt, personalize, and apply it; (ii) preserve institutional memory; and (iii) build organizational capacity. A blend of staff recollections and reminiscences formed and became the basis for the well-regarded publication titled *ADB: Reflections and Beyond* (also referred to as the "Yellow Book") and its audio companion *Beyond: Stories and Sounds from ADB's Region*. The two products marked ADB's first endeavor at knowledge harvesting through storytelling. ADB took

A people are as healthy and confident as the stories they tell themselves. Sick storytellers can make nations sick. Without stories we would go mad. Life would lose its moorings or orientation ... Stories can conquer fear, you know. They can make the heart larger.

—Ben Okri

time to listen to itself and staff liked what they heard. In short, the Yellow Book and sound composition whetted ADB's appetite for storytelling in various contexts and applications.

Then, in August 2010, the Knowledge Management Center mapped out sector and thematic milestones in ADB's journey toward sustainable development—the *ADB Sustainable Development Timeline*. The brochure framed a select record of progress by ADB and its

member countries across the many dimensions of sustainable development, e.g., social, economic, and environmental. But it was decided from the onset that the timeline should amount to more than just a sheet of paper. In fact, after the success of the preceding knowledge-harvesting exercise, it seemed natural to take things further and represent the timeline in a more versatile medium—an interactive, audiovisual platform that would allow users to browse not just data and information but also, more importantly, evocations of events. In December 2010, the Knowledge Management Center initiated the long and arduous task of morphing the *ADB Sustainable Development Timeline* brochure multidimensionally.

Approach

Platform. The *ADB Sustainable Development Timeline* would host an easy-to-access and organic repository of interviews, short documentaries of projects shot on location, sounds (as in *Beyond: Stories and Sounds from ADB's Region*), B-roll footage, animations, graphics, voice-overs, videos, statistics, photo essays, etc.

Research. With the *ADB Sustainable Development Timeline* brochure setting the compass for content, project staff rummaged through ADB reports and publications from 1966, archived films and stills, online research material, and sundry other references to scope the context of milestones. By the time research and writing had ended, the project's reach had grown to four timelines: the existing *ADB Sustainable Development Timeline*, and timelines of world events touching sustainable development since 1948, historical highlights of ADB since its establishment, and ADB-hosted communities of practice from the 1990s. (The *World Sustainable Development Timeline* was subsequently published with an eye to Rio + 20, scheduled on 20–22 June 2012.)

Production. Some 72 ADB staff—past and present, senior and junior—were invited to an outside setting and their experiences of particular events or projects mined and preserved through video. This yielded 11 hours and 30 minutes of film, later categorized and tagged in multiple topics. Location shoots inside ADB premises—both in headquarters and resident missions—followed. Visits to Indonesia and Viet Nam were also made to interface with beneficiaries and put on view associated landmarks and landscapes. The trips delivered high-quality interviews and footage that made for compelling documentaries.

Knowledge Organization. The wealth of knowledge generated by the exercise demanded systematic organization. Using Adobe Flash Player to house the structure for the product, project staff arranged the material by year, theme, region, community of practice, ADB president, and more. The effect is a personal experience: each user can click or scroll through videos, pick a story of interest, and probe content in nonlinear fashion.

Challenges. A multimedia creation of 300+ videos does not come easily. In the early stages, working

Box 4 *continued*

through the rigid business processes of ADB slowed progress and caused frustration. Next, staff were sometimes noncommittal—this affected scheduling. Then, after transcription and tagging, hours were spent sifting through collections to showcase stimulating content.

Way Forward

In December 2011, on the occasion of ADB’s 44th anniversary, the introductory video of the *ADB Sustainable Development Timeline* was shown to ADB staff who enthused about it. A series of longer demonstrations took place soon after, all generating pleased responses. Many saw the potential of the videos, either used collectively or individually, for learning and development, recognizing firsts, safeguarding institutional memory, and a myriad other uses. ADB’s human resources division, for example, suggested that the product be showcased during induction programs for new staff, noting that the storytelling mode eases learning and retention of critical knowledge. Some of ADB’s external partners, such as the University of the Philippines in Los Baños and Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (Central Bank of the Philippines), were impressed when elements of the timeline were presented to them during their field trips to ADB, and wanted to see more. More content is being generated to expand the range of the product. Through the briefings, ADB realized that gaps need to be filled, such as deeper coverage of subregions, even greater variety in topics, additional inclusion of women and new staff, etc.

Conclusion

The *ADB Sustainable Development Timeline* video sprang from creativity and innovation, method, and no small amount of work. But collaboration and open-mindedness in the organization powered performance. For ADB to have embarked on such an initiative proves how much it values the knowledge, experience, and insights of its professionals and wants to share those. Through this, ADB hopes to better shape the future, with respect to the past.

Their story, yours and mine—it’s what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them.

—William Carlos Williams

Source: Extracted from ADB. 2012. *Interactive Stories of Sustainable Development*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/interactive-stories-sustainable-development

Reporting on Knowledge Management. Between 2005, when ADB first conducted a MAKE survey, and 2011 the increase in the number of respondents jumped a cumulative 1,132%, averaging 162% annually.²⁶ Without a doubt, more and more ADB staff have become aware of the organization’s efforts to improve its knowledge stocks and flows. The highest annual percentage increase, 155%, was recorded in 2009, the year the *Action Plan for Knowledge Management, 2009–2011* was approved. Various factors have contributed to this growing engagement, one of which is the change in the way ADB testifies on knowledge management initiatives at the corporate level. One concrete example is ADB’s Annual Report, which showcases ADB’s operations, projects, internal administration, financial management, special funds, and more. In 2004, when the knowledge management framework was approved, “knowledge management” merited 350 words in the chapter on institutional effectiveness. The next 2 years saw “knowledge

As we read the school reports on our children, we realize a sense of relief that can rise to delight that thank Heaven nobody is reporting in this fashion on us.

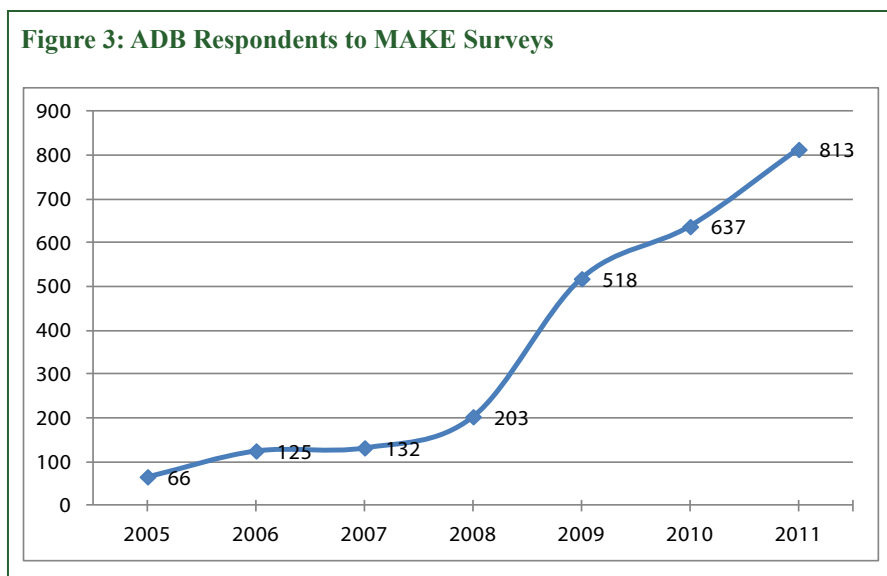
—Joseph Priestley

management” shuttled between the chapters on operations and internal initiatives. In 2007, a new chapter on generating and sharing knowledge was introduced: it highlighted ADB’s comparative advantages as a knowledge institution and discussed approaches to meeting the needs of external and internal audiences. Somewhat belatedly, given the importance of evaluation-based learning, a new chapter on

²⁶ At the end of 2005, ADB had a staff of 2,456. (The total comprised 887 international staff and 1,569 national and administrative staff.) At the end of 2011, it had a staff of 2,958, that is, 6 members of Management and 1,055 international and 1,897 national and administrative staff.

independent evaluation also appeared. In 2008, a new chapter on sector and thematic highlights underscored quality, knowledge, and innovation for inclusive and sustainable development. In 2009, ADB once again expanded reporting specific to knowledge management: in addition to the chapter on generating and sharing knowledge, a new chapter on delivering an effective organization carried a section on strengthening learning, which accorded pride of place to implementation of the *Action Plan for Knowledge Management, 2009–2011*. In 2010, three of ADB’s five regional departments included sections on knowledge management in their respective chapters; in 2011, all of them did. Another example is ADB’s *Development Effectiveness Review*, which reports annually on ADB’s corporate results framework and, since its introduction in 2008, uses the annual MAKE survey assessment rating to help gauge ADB’s operational effectiveness in managing knowledge better. The Knowledge Management Center instigated all such reporting throughout.

Figure 3: ADB Respondents to MAKE Surveys



Source: Author.

Some Benefits of Pursuing a Culture-Based Knowledge Strategy. An organization can benefit severally from pursuing a knowledge strategy.²⁷ For ADB, a relative newcomer in the field of knowledge management, the bottom line is:

Affirming Knowledge as a Strategic Asset and Critical Resource. With Asia experiencing rapid economic growth over the recent decades, ADB recognizes that financial assistance is not always the primary commodity its developing member countries need. In many ways, ADB’s knowledge—which benefits from its strategic position to identify trends within and across the region and capacity for interdisciplinary and integrated approaches—has greater pull and push. Pursuing a culture-based knowledge strategy has further promoted the view of knowledge as a strategic asset and a critical source of competitive advantage and highlighted its dual nature as both an input and output. Offices and departments in ADB now pay greater attention to the sourcing, quality, dissemination, and use of the knowledge they husband.

Change is the end result of all true learning.
—Leo Buscaglia

²⁷ The *Knowledge Solutions* on internal knowledge markets list illustrative motivations behind knowledge management efforts. See ADB. 2012. *On Internal Knowledge Markets*. Manila. Available: www.adb.org/publications/internal-knowledge-markets

Setting Clearer Directions. Over the last 3 years, ADB has developed a habit of asking if it is managing knowledge better. Now that the *Action Plan for Knowledge Management, 2009–2011* is closed, ADB ought to capture lessons from past successes and shortcomings by raising the following questions: What did ADB set out to do? What worked well, and why? Moving forward, what might ADB do differently next time, and how?

Learnings? An organization’s culture—not forgetting its subcultures—determines assumptions about what knowledge is, hence, what stocks and flows of that may be worth managing. It arbitrates the relationships between individuals, teams, and communities; sets the context for social interaction; and shapes the processes whereby knowledge is identified, created, stored, shared, and used. No two organizations are similar and there are disquieting limits to what learnings can be vulgarized for the benefit of others. If knowledge is the combination of information and human context, there is no easy way from the earth to the stars. “An intelligent hell would be better than a stupid paradise,” declared Victor Hugo. Yet, practitioners must have their take-aways. Pending an after-action review of the

The learning and knowledge that we have, is, at the most, but little compared with that of which we are ignorant.

—Plato

Action Plan for Knowledge Management, 2009–2011, some easy and not-so-easy lessons might be:

Fostering and Sustaining a Culture of Knowledge Transfer. One must, with hard work, offset counterproductive assumptions—“Knowledge is power,” “I cannot share without Management approval,” “Who am I to teach

others?”—with values, beliefs, and behaviors conducive to knowledge generation and sharing. Knowledge management is the responsibility of each member of an organization. To innovate knowledge management and learning holistically, individuals, teams, and communities must be heartened to continually ask, learn, and share. In ADB, the current popularity and perceived value of communities of practice should not be taken for granted. Of course, communities work best if they are clear about domain, values, membership, norms and rules, structure and process, resources, flow of energy, and results. But, if too much informality can kill a community so can too much attention from Management to what is, in the final analysis, a voluntary way of organizing. One cannot force people to collaborate and a chicken does not get fatter the more you weigh it. Management must learn to cultivate these fertile organizational forms without destroying them; after all, since members select themselves, communities of practice only last for as long as there is interest in joining and maintaining the group. Equally, it should be recognized that action plans, even when they provide impetus, are by nature dysfunctional: an organization that professes to become a knowledge organization should not rely on temporary expedients: knowledge management must be part and parcel of everyday occupation in a culture of knowledge.

Recognizing Different Learning Styles. Personnel—in ADB’s case, international staff and national and administrative staff—develop knowledge management capabilities at different rates. It is important that ADB should draw knowledge management initiatives that meet the distinct needs of personnel streams as the MAKE surveys continue to explain.

Leveraging Off Strengths. The *2010 Learning for Change* survey undertaken by ADB revealed that of the four learning subsystems of organization, people, knowledge, and technology, ADB staff feel most satisfied with technology. There is little surprise here. Taking off from this, ADB rolled out a bevy of integrated and mutually supportive collaboration mechanisms; aggregators of news, events, and knowledge products; and other tools anchored in technology, including social media. A rising tide lifts all ships.

Culture is the widening of the mind and of the spirit.

—Jawaharlal Nehru

Becoming a Learning Organization. A decided step that ADB took in pursuing its knowledge strategy was to break things into outcome indicators, useful results indicators, specific activity indicators, targets and associated baseline values, sources of verification, and assumptions and risks. This enabled

ADB to benchmark and subsequently rate and validate progress. Surveys such as the biennial *Learning for Change* survey²⁸—developed and conducted by the Knowledge Management Center in 2010—and the well-established MAKE survey have provided insights into ADB’s performance and given reason to raise the bar.

The 2010 MAKE survey revealed that ADB has successfully transitioned from stage 2 (implementation) to stage 3 (reinvigoration) of the MAKE Knowledge Management Implementation Model. The 2011 MAKE survey confirmed even more progress in ADB’s knowledge capabilities across all eight MAKE performance dimensions and its transition from stage 3 (reinvigoration) to stage 4 (inculcation). This view is supported by the fact that the

Culture is the process by which a person becomes all that they were created capable of being.

—Thomas Carlyle

average total score for all staff improved steadily since the 2008 MAKE survey. The 2011 Asian MAKE panel of experts confirmed this by recognizing ADB, for the first time, as a 2011 Asian MAKE Winner at the 12th World Knowledge Forum held in Seoul, Republic of Korea, in October 2011.²⁹ [To note, it only took 1 year for ADB to transition from stage 3 (reinvigoration), a stage reached in 2010, to stage 4 (inculcation) in 2011.]³⁰ However, stage 4 is perhaps the most critical juncture. Staff complacency must be challenged with a new set of ambitious goals and objectives to inculcate knowledge management and learning into all organizational processes and procedures. Besides improving internal knowledge capabilities and processes, external partners and stakeholders must also become more integrated into the organization’s core knowledge activities to create a transparent, “boundary-less” enterprise that sees knowledge as culture. *A posse ad esse.*

Further Reading

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For further information.

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²⁸ ADB. 2010 *Learning for Change Survey*. Manila. Available: www.scribd.com/knowledge_solutions/d/86442373-2010-learning-for-change-survey

²⁹ The chapter on delivering an effective organization in ADB’s annual report for 2011 celebrated the award.

³⁰ ADB began its transition from stage 2 (implementation) to stage 3 (reinvigoration) in 2009. This coincides with the approval in July of that year of the *Action Plan for Knowledge Management, 2009–2011*.

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Asian Development Bank

ADB's vision is an Asia and Pacific region free of poverty. Its mission is to help its developing member countries reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of their people. Despite the region's many successes, it remains home to two thirds of the world's poor: 1.8 billion people who live on less than \$2 a day, with 903 million struggling on less than \$1.25 a day. ADB is committed to reducing poverty through inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration.

Based in Manila, ADB is owned by 67 members, including 48 from the region. Its main instruments for helping its developing member countries are policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance.

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Knowledge Solutions are handy, quick reference guides to tools, methods, and approaches that propel development forward and enhance its effects. They are offered as resources to ADB staff. They may also appeal to the development community and people having interest in knowledge and learning.

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