# Cultural learning barriers present challenges

*By Arthur Robinson*

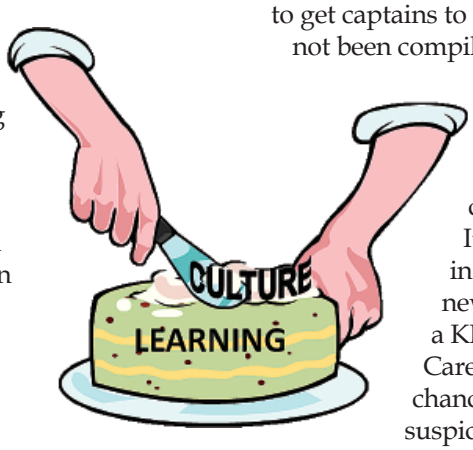
Challenges await any trainer who tries to impart new information to a group of people. But place that trainer in a military environment, with a group of sharp young officers as students, and make the subject matter both important and written for a more experienced audience and you have just increased your challenges significantly. So why would a lesson on knowledge management be so difficult to deliver?

My formal exposure to the concepts of KM and its components began while I was an instructor for the Signal Captains' Career Course at Fort Gordon, back in 2009. I strongly suspect that I had been a practitioner of the art for the better part of my life. However, it took being assigned as the instructor who delivered the KM class to a group of captains before I came to understand many of the aspects of what defines knowledge, how well it may or may not be managed and the challenges inherent in handling it.

To begin, let me disengage from any reader who wishes to argue the point that knowledge can never be managed. Assuming the preceding sentence may be true, I would argue the point that even if we do not manage it, we certainly cultivate it by encouraging learning and a sharing of tidbits of information that we have, perhaps like a parent helps a child. So, rather than get caught up in semantics, let's simply agree to put off this discussion for a while because whether or not you agree that knowledge can be managed, you must certainly acknowledge that getting someone to adopt a new idea or technique can present a challenge if not an outright obstacle.

How many times have we caught ourselves struggling with a new idea simply because we didn't understand some supporting principle? Or perhaps our problem was that the new information didn't fit a preconceived notion of right or wrong or it challenged some dearly held belief that we had been cherishing for some time.

In any case, ask anyone who has ever had to teach classes about what kind of challenges exist when presenting new information to a group of students. You should get an earful! Yes, the classroom may have been too cold, too warm, too noisy or too sunny. But if you are able to overcome these semi-common obstacles to learning, you would think that giving a class should prove to be an easy enough task to achieve. However, sitting in the back of your mind might be the thought that while you had just delivered a world-class lesson on some topic, some, if not all students still didn't embrace or, dare I say, relish the gems of thought that you had been dispensing. This hurdle is what brings me to the theme of this article.

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I strongly believe that the mostly overlooked concept of culture, and one of the pillars of KM—the people pillar-- is often responsible for blocking learning to a significant degree. I was able to experience this over and over while providing instruction to captains attending the career course though the idea didn't solidify for a while.

The material I had been using to instruct the captains was not reaching the target audience and I was at a complete loss to explain why this was so. I surmised that the majority of the class believed that another lesson had been checked off the required to-do list and they could breathe easy. But, little learning had occurred which was the whole point of having the class in the first place. I could count on one hand the number of officers who bravely approached me afterwards to inquire further into the topic of KM, and I would still have fingers left over.

Something was obviously missing.

Though it didn't take long to discover that much of the material was shooting over the heads of the intended audience, it took time and assistance from a good friend before I could identify the problem as one of culture. Trying to get captains to learn a new topic using materials that had not been compiled with them in mind as the intended audience was what I decided had been the problem all along with many of the topics on which I had to provide the instruction. This is where the culture issue came to mind.

It took some time, but I was invited to join in on an opportunity to build something new. I was asked to assist with co-authoring a KM elective for use by the Signal Captains' Career Course program. This gave me the chance to try out a new idea to see if my suspicions were valid. So, we began the process of building our new KM lesson by holding a few meetings to lay out our plan on how to attack the learning problem.

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I knew that I wanted to try something different and my co-author partner, who is involved in completing a master degree in KM, was more than willing to actively participate in this endeavor.

I started with some memories of what it was like to sit through numerous training classes over a number of years and recalled that the ones that made the biggest impression on me were the ones that were definitely out of the ordinary. One such example that remains fresh to this day had to do with a lesson about the rule that one should always keep their chemical protective mask with them at all times.

The lesson was taught outdoors and while sitting in a set of bleachers along with my classmates, we observed a small foot patrol coming from behind the bleachers. When this patrol advanced to a spot directly in front of the students, someone yelled "Gas!" and the members of the patrol immediately reacted.

One member of the patrol pulled his dirty laundry from the canvas carrier for his mask. Another Soldier pulled food out of the carrier. Only one member of the patrol pulled his protective mask from his carrier, put it on properly, and continued with the patrol. The other members of the patrol were all lying on their backs wiggling their arms and legs in the air (the dying cockroach pose) in the supposed throes of dying from a chemical attack. Because this was not the typical classroom lesson, the idea stuck with me all these years that one should always keep the protective mask handy. I am certain you too have experienced something similar in your life at some time in a learning environment. For me, I learned that lesson 42 years ago but can still recall the class as if it were yesterday. This is what I was hoping for with our new KM elective lesson.

The other key concept to our new KM elective lesson was that we, the lesson developers, had to deliver the class at least two or three times to work out any bugs we overlooked. This allows the people most intimately familiar with the lesson material to see how well it works in front of a live audience before the lesson gets handed off to an instructor.

In the elective lesson we were building, we talk about three pillars of KM, people (or culture), processes, and technology. Each pillar has its own separate block of instruction and each block has two hours of time set aside. The KM elective itself has 12 hours of time allocated in six equal blocks of classroom time. It is during the people/culture block that we introduce an exercise to the captains that involves them leaving the classroom on a scavenger hunt.

The scavenger hunt has the class broken up into two teams. Because this is an elective, the teams, so far, have ranged in size from four to two members. Each team is given a handout filled with images and a brief description of some poster, sign or plaque to be found at a destination that matches the image and description in the handout. By recording a single letter from the poster or plaque, they will find that they have eventually composed a word. But the goal they were told about in the classroom before setting out on their hunt was to come up with a phrase.

Since the people/culture block of instruction in class emphasized overcoming cultural obstacles and promoting sharing, it was hoped that the students would recognize that they had found only a single word and therefore had not achieved the goal of the scavenger hunt. Upon returning to the classroom, the students are given enough time to socialize. While engaging each other in small talk, someone eventually asks a member of the opposing team what word they found. When the class quiz is then given, the only question to be answered on it is what the phrase is. When sharing of information actually occurs amongst the students and they have each other's word, they have no problem writing down what the phrase was. Pow! Mission accomplished!

Though this seems like a very simplistic exercise to be conducted in what is often billed as a graduate level program, we managed to achieve several good results. First of all, we try and teach the concepts of KM in easy to comprehend language using easy to recognize examples. Before turning the students loose on the scavenger hunt in this particular block of instruction, they are explicitly told what goal they are to achieve. When they return to the classroom and recognize they have not yet achieved the goal of the hunt that was to find a phrase, they share this information through socialization. When they complete the simple quiz successfully, they come away with a good feeling out of achieving the goal of the hunt which helps to reinforce what the learning was all about. In this case, they recognize that to succeed they had to share the unique information that each hunt team found.

I honestly believe, though it is still much too soon to recognize this as a truth, that the students we had for this KM elective lesson will remember the need to share and that this concept should not be taken for granted. Combining an out-of-the-box concept for a class exercise (the scavenger hunt) with the goal of finding a wordy phrase that can only be achieved by remembering what their instruction was all about and keeping the whole thing as simple as possible, is what our task as instructors was. Only time will tell if we instructors had managed to pass along any nuggets of information that will be remembered and prove useful to our future leaders. But I shall remain confident that we achieved our learning goal!

***Arthur Robinson*** *is the current contracted knowledge management advisor working in the Signal Center's G6 office with the Knowledge Management Officer. Prior to this posting, he served as an instructor with the Signal Captains Career Course. He is a retired 25A Signal Officer and a 48G Middle East Foreign Affairs Officer. He graduated in 1973 from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and spent his post-military career days as a trainer.*

## Acronym QuickScan

**KM** - Knowledge Management
**SCCC** - Signal Captains' Career Course