Course Name: Organizational Behaviour: Individual Dynamics in Organization

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Lecture – 02 & 03

Lecture 52: Understanding knowledge hiding- what it is and what it is not

Hello students. Namaskar. Welcome back to the course on Organizational Behavior, Individual Dynamics in Organization. Today, I move to one of the most important lectures of the entire course which is also my research area for the last couple of years and it is nothing but knowledge sharing and hiding. So, I like to combine two lectures together, one is knowledge sharing and hiding and we will also look into factors affecting knowledge. I repeat, we will look deeply into understanding knowledge hiding, what it is and what it is not and we will also look into certain factors that affect knowledge hiding.

I am Dr. Abraham Cyril Issac, I am a faculty at the School of Business, Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati.

So let us move to today's lecture. The theme of today's lecture is "despite efforts designed to enhance knowledge transfer within organizations, success has been elusive."

So in the previous lecture, if you recollect, we had looked into knowledge sharing in detail. We have understood and tried to underscore the importance of knowledge sharing, why knowledge sharing is critical, why knowledge management is solely based on the act of knowledge sharing and what makes knowledge sharing so much important that organizations cannot avoid it. So, this is what has given us the background to understand why even after such efforts to actually propagate knowledge sharing still knowledge management is not efficient, still knowledge sharing is elusive. To look into that I will look into the background of this, how knowledge sharing has not been effective and to understand the background I have to look into the organizational politics at first. I have touched on this organizational politics in the previous module but I would want to give a comprehensive picture linking all the typical acts of organizational politics and how that is happening within your organization you will acknowledge and appreciate the fact that all these aspects are happening and in the center of all this we have controlling knowledge.

Let us look into this one by one. So, the first one is attacking and blaming. When you are looking into attacking and blaming this is something which is quite common in organization. Many a time we see that something that goes wrong you are attacked or there is a blame game that is initiated that is a common act of organizational politics that is happening.

Then there is forming coalitions. There are groups, cartels that are formed to actually propagate maybe some false propaganda against you or maybe something which is detrimental to the whole organization or one group loathes another group or hates another group then they might be forming coalitions with another say cross cross-functional department and they tend to degrade or demotivate the initial group. So, all these forming coalitions and cultivating networks are very critical organizational politics strategies that are found in organization and you will accept and acknowledge this.

There are also situations where individuals have to actually start creating obligations you know something like you I did it for you, you owe me one all these actually pertain to the fact that you are creating obligations and finally there are also situations where impression management happens. Most of the individuals they who are actually insecure most of the individuals who are not very clear on their ability or has a certain idea that I might not be able to do it all those individuals resort to impression management that in front of the authority in front of the boss he or she has to look good. They behave as if they have done all the work.

They behave as if they have you know they are the life force power of the organization. They are the central pillar kingpin factor of the organization. So, all this pertains to managing impression. In all these organizational politics strategies of organizational politics at the center is controlling knowledge. Now this is my take on this because all these aspects let it be attacking blaming, let it be forming coalitions, let it be cultivating networks they all can be mitigated to certain extent but when you are actually made devoid of certain core knowledge that you should have in decision making in something which is very critical to your job and you are not given access to it then there is no bigger organizational politics than that. There is no bigger act of organizational politics than that. So let us understand this from the background of controlling knowledge.

Now the intellectual assets of employees if you see are not owned by the organization as such. Workers cannot be forced or coerced to transfer the knowledge to the organizational commitments or to the organization as such. So, when you are looking into all the efforts designed to enhance knowledge transfer within organization success has been elusive.

So this is what the theme of the organization of this particular lecture is also. When you are looking into such situations where you want to deliberately increase the knowledge transfer but you are not able to do it for the simple reason that willingness of as we have

discussed in the previous lecture please recollect that willingness of the source is very much critical. If the person itself is not ready to share the knowledge, if the person itself who is supposedly the person who should be the receiver is not able to accept the knowledge or is not having the inherent capacity to accept the knowledge then the entire knowledge sharing process fails. So, although much research has explored the factors that contribute to knowledge sharing those that contribute to knowledge hiding are yet unexplored. So, when we look into knowledge sharing one thing is critical and the critical aspect is that you are going to get a successful or an effective knowledge management system or a successful knowledge sharing activity only when there is willingness from the or by the employee to actually share knowledge.

If there is no willingness by the co-workers let us say there are two co-workers and they are not ready to share the knowledge, knowledge sharing will not happen. Knowledge management as a system is a failure. So, this willingness actually brings in a diametrically opposite construct which is knowledge hiding and this is the background why knowledge hiding has emerged as a research construct and it has been studied of late and has got great importance in terms of organizational context. So let us look into knowledge hiding and the practice of controlling knowledge and how it has emerged in this continuum. The first and foremost aspect is absence of knowledge sharing.

Now basically when you look into absence of knowledge sharing it could be because of two reasons. One is you do not have the actual expertise to share knowledge. Absence of knowledge sharing should not be you know actually looked down upon. There could be some critical rationality behind it. It could be that the individual who is supposed to share knowledge does not have the required expertise in the first place.

Second they might not be willing to share knowledge because they might think that I have learned it through a difficult process. I have earned it through a difficult process maybe it took time, it took a lot of you know cost investment or it took a lot of effort in actually learning this. Why should I teach this or share this piece of knowledge simply to another person? So this is what makes absence of knowledge sharing important. Absence of knowledge sharing need not be knowledge hiding for this reason. One that you might be not having the required expertise in the first place.

Second you might not be willing to share the knowledge because you might be looked down maybe people will start understanding that okay you are not that an expert in that particular field. So how can these factors actually trigger or actually make it the first factor which is absence of knowledge sharing?

Now comes a second factor which is a second aspect in the continuum which is knowledge hoarding. Now as the functional word hoarding suggests knowledge hoarding

is more of you know hiding the knowledge for some point in time. But of late let us say after some time there is a possibility that the person is going to share knowledge maybe after two weeks, maybe after two months or maybe after two years when the time is right he or she will definitely share the knowledge and this is what qualifies as knowledge hoarding. So, I am trying to distinguish between each and every constant.

One was absence of knowledge sharing which is not essentially knowledge hiding. Second is knowledge hoarding which is again not knowledge hiding for the reason which I mentioned just now and the third is employee silence which will deal in greater detail in the last module. But to understand or put things into perspective employee silence is remaining silent. You are not asked something. You are asked you would have told but since you are not asked nobody is telling anything.

So that is the way that employee silence because you feel that it is not the right time to speak or maybe that you have had a very you know unfortunate reaction when you spoke last time or there might be a situation where you are not even understanding or you do not have the correct understanding that whether should I speak or not speak. So, all these factors actually relates to employee silence.

Now comes the last part in the continuum which is knowledge hiding and this ladies and gentlemen I believe is the most extreme step of controlling knowledge. Knowledge hiding is nothing but withholding knowledge even when requested. Let us look into knowledge hiding in greater detail.

Knowledge hiding is nothing but withholding knowledge even when somebody is requesting you and there has been some research that has happened especially, I should thank Connelly et al 2012 who have come up with this stunning research on knowledge hiding. They were also phenomenal in bringing out the dimensionality of the construct and also, they have given certain strategies that are found in organization or observed in organization pertain to knowledge hiding when we look into situations.

Now before going through this slide take 10 seconds of your time and think of those situations where somebody came to you to ask something which they know that you know but still you refused. Also think of those situations in which you went to some person to ask something which you think which you know that they know but still they refused that. This is the classic case of knowledge hiding.

You might get n number of examples. In the organizational context itself you might get n number of examples. So when you have approached that person how did he or she behave? There are different strategies how knowledge hiding is actually observed in an organization and the first one is playing dumb. You know the moment you ask something

they start playing dumb. They change the topic or they might you know tell something which is very trivial or something which is unrelated they will start playing dumb. So this is one of the common strategies what is observed when it comes to knowledge hiding.

The second is evasive hiding. Evasive hiding is the moment you are asking something they just vanish, they just evade, they just vanish into thin air. So, this is evasive hiding. And the third possible strategy that you would have seen is rationalized hiding.

You would ask something they might say no, no the manager has strictly instructed that I should not disclose anything at this point in time. At a later point in time definitely I will tell you but at this point in time a manager has given clear instructions. Take the case of any situation where let us look into a group and an organization. You might not get the required knowledge or information from a research-oriented institution. Maybe you cannot know the reasons for maybe the way or the detailed plan for the next rocket launch from ISRO or maybe with respect to atomic secrets which pertain to the national security of a country. So all these aspects pertain to rationalized hiding. All these strategies pertain to rationalized hiding. Now these three were actually brought out by Konely Atal 2012 study.

Interestingly another study Jain Vorki 2018 came up with a fourth aspect which is more prominent in the Indian context and that is counter questioning. You might have observed that the moment you are asking something which you are quite obvious that they know, they start questioning you back so that the core information is not shared, the core knowledge is not shared.

 So these are some of the strategies playing them, evasive hiding, rationalized hiding and finally counter questioning that are generally observed in the organization as part of knowledge hiding. So I hope that clears or that clarifies what knowledge hiding is and what are the different strategies associated with knowledge hiding.

Now let us look into knowledge hiding from a concluding note. When you are looking into KH or knowledge hiding, it is a unique construct and can happen on an individual basis, on a team level and even at an organizational level which we have slightly looked into. In team level when a worker chooses to keep information, read knowledge from their co-workers hidden.

So this happens at individual basis which we have detailed in the previous slides. At a team level when a worker refuses to share knowledge or information with a team member when asked directly. So all these studies have actually pertained to this particular different levels of analysis and there can be also knowledge hiding that can happen at an organizational level when a worker purposefully withholds information in order to benefit the organization. So it might be that the rational or rationalized hiding might have some

level of base in this particular study. So, when you are looking into such organization like you are dealing with let us say national security of the country or some of the core secrets of the country which otherwise cannot be made as a public document, you tend to hide that particular knowledge.

So knowledge hiding can happen at the individual level, can happen at the team level and can also happen at the organizational level. So, when you look into the latter action, it highlights the fact that in an organizational setting knowledge hiding is not always a negative behavior because there is some rationalization associated to that and can even have advantageous effects like safeguarding the secrecy or a security of third parties interest. So initial discussions in knowledge hiding generally came from white lies. You do not want to hurt somebody's feeling, you tend to say a lie and that is called as white lie. Most of the studies revolved around white lies.

But when you are actually looking into and our research here is more focused on whether it is having any positive connotation yet we are not able to make an assertive statement that there is some positive connotation. So, knowledge hiding is essentially a negative phenomenon and it is having some short-term dividends no doubt about it. But in long run it takes a toll on the organization. So that is what the basic understanding we have at this point in time pertaining to our research in knowledge hiding specifically and across the world and when we look into knowledge hiding specifically, when you are looking specifically into a strategy like rationalized hiding, we have to accept that there is some level of positivity, there is some level of act which protects the interest of others which is pertaining to the positive aspect of knowledge hiding.

Now let us look into the factors affecting knowledge hiding. Why because there are some detailed studies which we have done itself in terms of antecedents of knowledge hiding but I am not going to that. But to understand or make the scope of this lecture clear let me just jot down some factors affecting knowledge hiding. The first one is job insecurity. When you are looking into the employees concerns specifically about the stability of the jobs across you know the time period days months and years insecurity can motivate knowledge hiding as insecure employees perceive that knowledge sharing may reduce their competitive edge because moment they are coming to the organization they feel that they are having some competitive edge because of the said knowledge and the moment they think that it is shared, it is not their own private property then there might be a problem with their competitive edge and they might be undermined in the organization. So, job security is an essential antecedent that works towards knowledge hiding.

Another important aspect is personality trait. We have looked into those personality traits in detail in the personality module. So, beyond the influence of the work environment personality traits have been implicated as antecedents of knowledge hiding. So, there are critical factors if you look into the big five. Most of the traits they have some other effects on knowledge hiding.

So personality traits are also understood as serious antecedents of knowledge hiding. Then comes emotional intelligence. The emotional intelligence of an individual also plays a vital role in establishing his or her knowledge of hiding tendencies. You know emotionally intelligent people tend to actually stay away from knowledge hiding practices because they understand that in long run it is not only going to affect the organization but in turn it is going to affect the reputation of the individual as well.

When you look into the interpersonal trust specifically, interpersonal trust is considered as one of the fundamental critical aspects of establishing a healthy relationship. There is no denying the fact. Studies have unequivocally found that the knowledge hiding behavior is caused by a distrust loop initiated by the knowledge-hider. So, in this case the distrust loop is qualified by a certain level of reciprocity. You know in organizational context take 10 seconds and think of situations where you had actually hidden some important knowledge with towards somebody or you might have done a wrong practice against some individual within the organization. There are chances that they will reciprocate in a similar way next when they get the option or when they get the chance. So, this reciprocity actually builds a distrust loop.

So initially you were asked something, the person you didn't trust that much so there was a distrust that was there because of the lack of the trust or the trust deficit actually encourage you to hide something. When the case came in a full circle you had to ask something to him or her, she or he denied in the same way then there is a clear distrust loop because of the reciprocal nature of this trust. So, this is what actually gives way to knowledge hiding and it becomes a vicious cycle. It keeps on happening again and again and these are some of the critical factors that affect knowledge hiding. So, I would like to conclude most of the studies I have taken some cases to conclude the class but here I will try to make use of core research paper of our research group which looked into knowledge hiding from the power basis.

So it might be clear as of now because if you recollect the previous classes on power it actually discussed and deliberated on different basis of power. So, since that understanding is there with you I thought I will share this particular research that has come up in the journal of knowledge management recently. So, which looks into the effects of expert and referent power on knowledge sharing and hiding. Expert power again just recollect what we have learned in the power module it is nothing but the

expertise and referent power is more about the likability the individual is commanding because of the referent power. So, referent power and expert power, so employees with strong expert and referent power are more likely to share knowledge.

So the context of this research was that individuals in the organization with strong expert and referent power will they be sharing knowledge or will they be hiding knowledge. This was the premise with which we tend to start our research. We also got the support from the seminal literature review of Wang and Ngo 2010. They also suggested that there has been no study absolutely no study which links power and knowledge sharing. We also found that from our literature review through a morphological approach that there has been no study which has linked power as well as knowledge hiding.

So this was a typical gap we found out for our study and from that we took a study where we could understand the relationship of power specifically the personal power, expert power and referent power and knowledge sharing and hiding. So initial thought was the hypothesis how it came was the initial thought was it is common sense also. When we look into situations there are possibilities that are there can be easily understanding that when you have a certain expert power or referent power you tend to share more knowledge but if you feel that you are losing you are going to lose that expert power or referent power you tend to stay away from knowledge sharing or you are more prone to knowledge hiding. But on that premises we took this study and we found that the first premise was correct.

What assumption we had it turned out to be right. Organizations with strong expert and referent power are more likely to share knowledge there is no doubt about it because that will enhance their standing in the organization that will enhance their expert power that will also enhance their referent power for that matter. But expected losses in power are associated with reduced knowledge sharing and increased knowledge hiding. So, the moment they feel that if there is a barrier of if your expert power your referent power is going to take a hit then you are going to dissociate yourself with knowledge sharing or you are more prone to hide knowledge. Interestingly these negative outcomes are also associated with expected gains in power. I repeat when the power both expert and referent power were felt that it is we understood that even when the cases when it was increasing still people try to dissociate with knowledge sharing and we are more prone to hide knowledge.

Now we have our own explanations for this one could be that the knowledge itself might not be robust they might not feel that you know they might be you know not competent with the knowledge they are possessing and they might be thinking that okay this might actually waste my time it might actually take out my time which I have to do other

productive work. So even when the expert power is gained or referent power is gained they tend to hide knowledge they do not feel that their knowledge is should be disposed of in such a cheap way or such a you know trivial way. So, all these aspects actually pertain to this finding that negative outcomes are also associated with expected gains in power both the cases expert as well as referent power. So, what we concluded was that power plays an important but complex role in influencing employee participation in knowledge sharing. So, this was what we found out with that particular study and this is where we actually conclude today's lecture.

So this as I mentioned is one of the most important lectures of the entire course where I tried to bring in a new construct altogether. In the coming module we look into employee silence as well. But when you are looking into knowledge hiding per se what makes it more critical is that it has to be understood not as the absence of knowledge sharing. There are times when you try to make a mistake and you consider knowledge hiding as absence of knowledge sharing.

We have categorically established that it is not that. More than that knowledge hiding is intentional withholding of knowledge when requested. Go to all such situations in your mind map. Look into all possible you know examples which you can see in your organization that you have gone to a particular individual; you have asked that particular individual knowing that he or she knows but still they refuse to share that particular knowledge. Similarly, there are people who would have approached you knowing that you know that particular thing but still you had refused.

So introspect within yourself. See how knowledge hiding or controlling knowledge as such has emerged as one of the most vital and in fact, I will try to restructure it as one of the most central organizational politics strategy. Thank you for listening to me patiently. We will look into knowledge hiding in greater detail in the coming classes. Till then take care. Bye bye.