

Knowledge Management as Change Agent to Ensure the Sustainability of Emerging Knowledge Organizations

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Abstract: Few researchers addressed the link between information technology and knowledge transfer, and even fewer the relationships between motivational leadership and knowledge management. While it is realised in the literature that it might be a little problematic to implement knowledge management as a change agent during organizational change, it is argued that it can be used by what is today referred to as knowledge leaders, to manage not only knowledge creation, storing and codification, but also knowledge sharing to enhance the learning culture of emerging knowledge organizations. The commonality of most recent research indicates an emphasised focus on knowledge management (technical, human and communication components), and it is argued that knowledge leaders should implement strategic integrated communication to ensure the sustainability of knowledge organizations. These knowledge leaders should be able to: empower individuals to respond creatively to changing situations; adopt personal and active attitudes, individual and organizational goals; contribute to resonant leadership practices; should be self- and socially aware of emotions and goals; be equipped with skills such as self- and relationship management which is characterised by transparency, adaptability, collaboration and motivation; and should be associated with a supportive organizational climate due to a constructive organizational culture with the aim to inspire people to learn. Where knowledge management focuses on two main theoretical perspectives, namely human capital and knowledge based theory, the theory of strategic integrated communication emphasises that knowledge leaders should acknowledge the premises of the strategic intent of the organization by managing information through, inter alia, motivation, innovation and creativity. The research problem is that in spite of the tremendous research opportunities to examine these constructs, limited research has been conducted from emerging knowledge organization perspectives, especially during change and transformation. This study addressed this gap to enhance the field's discussion with the main aim to critically review existing literature based on an interpretivistic approach from a predominantly postmodern perspective. Hence a theoretical framework has been developed to indicate the interrelationship of these concepts which should be considered by emerging knowledge organizations in future to ensure sustainable stakeholder relationships.

Keywords: knowledge management, knowledge creation and sharing, knowledge leaders, emerging knowledge organizations, change and transformation, strategic integrated communication, sustainable stakeholder relationships.

1. Introduction

In research conducted by Politis (2001) and Bryant (2003) they concluded that although leaders paid attention to the learning organization initiative, it was not implemented in organizations. The most significant idea based on their research was the realization that knowledge management should be applied to the entire organization at all levels to ensure that learning takes place through knowledge creation, codification, storing and sharing. This set the scene for the move towards the concept of knowledge-oriented leadership linked to innovation (Donate and de Pablo, 2015). The need for further research between leadership, knowledge management and change in the organization, society and environment as pointed out by Bryant (2003) and Bo (2013) provided impetus for the research problem that a lack of studies exists to investigate the relationship between the use of knowledge management and strategic integrated communication by knowledge leaders during organizational change and transformation to create knowledge organizations. This study is exploratory in nature and seeks to address this gap and to enhance the field's discussion with two main objectives: to critically review existing literature based on an interpretivist approach as research methodology to set the scene for an alternative viewpoint; and to propose a theoretical framework to indicate the interrelatedness of these concepts. According to Bryman and Bell (2016), interpretivism as research methodology stems from an epistemological position and refers to the critical application of analyses of various academic traditions to study the social world. Although various researchers indicated the importance of knowledge as a strategic resource to create value depending from which discipline it is viewed, in the context of this paper, it is suggested that all knowledge management practices should be aligned with the strategic intent of the organization.

2. Approaches to change and transformation

In the context of this paper, the definition of change proposed by Kanter, Stein and Jick (1992) has been adopted: *the shift in behavior of the whole organization to one degree or another*; and transformation is seen as the step-by-step process of restructuring an existing organization by removing what does not work, keeping what does and implementing new systems, processes, infrastructure and cultural values where needed (Head, 1997). This

ultimately needs resources, structural and cultural processes aligned with the strategic intent of the organization which could arguably be possible through knowledge management and strategic integrated communication. Hence transformation is seen more than the flow and management of information, but also includes connectivity, creativity, innovation and participation by all to ensure relationship building. According to Crawford (2005:6) *nearly every modern organization is confronting the change in information systems, from ledger cards to a digital area*, which he refers to as the trend towards 'informatics', which arguably affects all aspects of the organization, including leadership, transformation and knowledge management. Change occurs at both individual and organizational level (Kim, 1998) of which the key elements are presented in Figure 1.

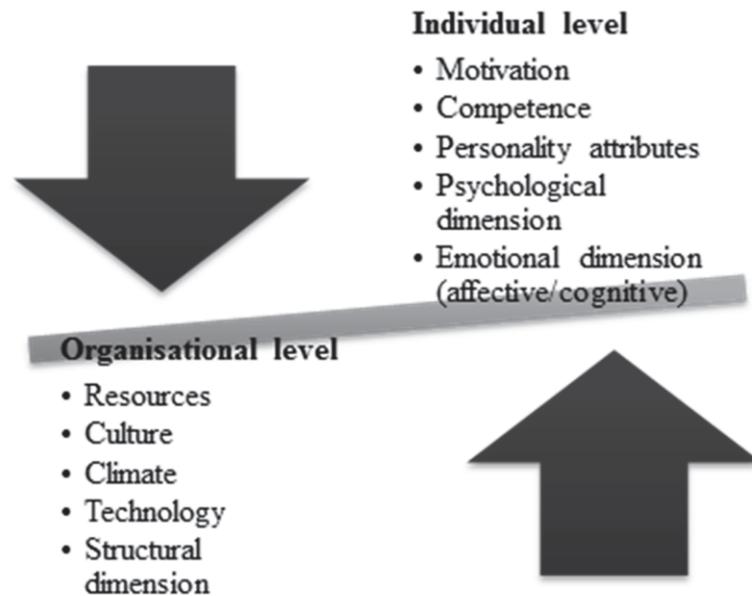


Figure 1: Change at individual and organizational levels

In terms of change management, the traditional approaches like the action research model (systematic analysis of change), the three-step change model (unfreezing moving and refreezing) and the phases of planned change approach (OD which focus on processes and participation), have been criticized by authors like Overman (1996) and Jaatinen (2002) in that they are too rigid, phases or steps are not chronologically ordered because of changes in the environment, that incremental and isolated changes rather than radical transformation are addressed, that they over rely on a management approach to reduce conflict, create order, control chaos and simplifying the complexities in the turbulent environment and that it will not work in all organizations. Furthermore, they argued that the underlying viewpoint is that information is power which needs to be controlled hence the need for structures. It is hence argued that although these approaches were effective for many decades, the introduction of new technology, overload systems, better-informed employees and worldwide access to modernistic approaches, conflict or crisis usually resulted from poor planning and control. In more contemporary approaches like the chaos theory (touched on participatory nature to change management), complexity theory (rooted in systems theory) and the contingency approach (role of external environment to develop congruence) the focus shifted to dynamic environments moving away from planned change and organizational development to the management of change and transformation at a strategic organizational level. This supports the underling purpose of this paper which sets out to emphasize the need for strategic integrated communication with the emphasis on true and interactive participation and a holistic perspective where all systems and subsystems are integrated to create shared ownership and commitment (Barker, 2013). Jaatinen (2002) made convincing arguments of the importance of interdependence, participation and relationship building in terms of new approaches to change management. Hence it is posited that the process of the system becomes important where all the subsystems should participate to add to the richness of information, knowledge creation, codification and storing, shared responsibility, trust, transparency, connectivity, creativity and relationship building. This argument is supported by authors like Grunig and Hung's (2000) who indicated the importance of the concepts of control mutuality, joint acceptance of degrees of symmetry, trust and satisfaction with the relationship to communication management and relationship building. Today most organizations tend to follow a combination of the planned and emergent approaches to change management usually based on their specific strategic goals and objectives.

3. Modernism versus postmodernism

In the literature, theorists who support a modernistic orientation to organizational communication focus on objective knowledge, universal laws, meaningful generalizations, absolute truths, objectivity and a belief in metanarratives (Woods, 1999; Irvine, 2014). In contrast some scholars questioned the viability of modernism in organizations and support contradictory viewpoints from a postmodern perspective, namely that it includes contained knowledge, it lacks universal laws, limited generalizations exist, irrationality, subjective and the rejection of metanarratives (Firat and Dholakia, 2006; Goneos-Malka, Grobler and Strasheim, 2013). Authors like Lyotard (1984) and Jameson (1984) have been regarded by many as the originators of postmodernism because of their skepticism of the metanarrative and universal truths of modernism thinking. Most definitions of postmodernism hold the same beliefs and focus on culture as an underlying factor. For example, Hassam (1985:119) defines postmodernism as a *number of related cultural tendencies, a constellation of values, a repertoire of procedures and attitudes*; Clarke (2006) sees it as a cultural trend and a new phase in history; and Firat and Dholakia (2006:126) hold that it is *first and foremost cultural phenomenon*.

A recent line of research has shown that the relation between opinions of modernism rational versus postmodern rational are blurring and both schools of thought agree that a grand theory will not explain everything in strategic integrated communication (Grunig, 2006). For example, Overton-de Klerk and Verwey (2013) have criticized the postmodern theories as modernistic and outdated and argued that postmodernists reject absolute standards and grand theories, typical of the modernism approach, in favor of awareness and tolerance of differences, ambiguity and conflict and that a multi-paradigm approach has become necessary. Postmodern researchers like Goneos-Malka et al (2013) and Brown (2006) argue against the tradition of a single best approach and say that multiple beliefs could co-exist; hence it is argued that both modernism and postmodernism should be integrated in any perspective. From a knowledge management viewpoint, networks of information and knowledge becomes key from a postmodern perspective to be able to react to constant influences and changes in the environment which necessitates ever-increasing networks and relationships with outside systems which Raatinen (2002:156) argues create 'borderless aggregates'. Postmodern contingency views responded to the challenge of planning for change and argued that although prediction is not possible, alignment of all systems makes an organization alert to changes and help them seek for a better alignment and strategic choices which can be active, proactive and reactive. Although it is realized that a blurring of lines exists between modernism and postmodernism, these viewpoints form the stance from which this study has been conducted.

4. Strategic integrated communication

This study reflects on integrative models which stress the need to consider interrelations amongst contexts and theories. The definition proposed by Barker (2013) for strategic integrated communication has been adapted for the purpose of this paper: the process of strategically managing mutually beneficial organizational and stakeholder relationships where the planning thereof recognizes the added value of a strategic integrated communication approach through the integration of all functions, systems and processes. This process should be information driven, participative, innovative, interactive, and focus on consistency in brand, messages, knowledge creation and sharing, processes, culture and the strategic intent of the organization. Barker (2013) posited that the 'creative idea' and 'creative integration' to solve actual organizational problems becomes important. At this point the importance of knowledge leaders makes business sense and becomes important to ensure a holistic and integrated approach is followed with interactive engagement and participation to ensure sustainable stakeholder relationships. The definition proposed by Slabbert and Barker (2014:71) has been adopted for this paper: *The result of the management of common interests between the organisation and strategic stakeholder(s) over time in order to achieve mutually beneficial goals through a high degree of reciprocity and continuous two-way symmetrical communication*. The importance of this argument is underlined by Martensson (2000) who argues that communication is a missing link in strategic management and leadership approaches.

5. Knowledge management

Although knowledge management has been a prominent field of research in various disciplines, it was only in the late 1990s that the importance thereof in learning organizations were highlighted by Baines (1997) who suggested that leaders were responsible for learning, both personally and organizationally. Learning organizations are skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge and to modify behaviors to reflect new knowledge and insights (Garvin, 1985); hence according to Singh (2008:5) *knowledge management and*

learning go hand in hand in organizations. Where learning organizations present a paradigm shift from the more traditional organization to new perspectives of how organizations should function, how they should be managed and how they should cope with changes (Hitt, 1996), more recent approaches focuses on emerging ‘knowledge organizations’ where the focus shifted to the realization of the importance of knowledge management, knowledge leadership, change and innovation. Crawford (2005:13) argues that innovation, as a personal construct, *may be manifested outward through knowledge management behaviors.* A substantial research study conducted by Politis (2001) found that self-management, transformational and transactional leadership styles are related to dimensions of knowledge acquisition, emphasizing the need for participative collaborative leadership in the face of transition to the knowledge society. In addition Rusly, Corner and Sun (2012:259) argue that substantial investment in technological infrastructure and processes *does not always guarantee successful knowledge management, rather it is claim that the main pillar of achievements rests on employee’s willingness and commitment to participate in the initiatives.*

The findings in the study by Crawford (2005:14) provided evidence of a *growing interest in the relationship between the ‘high touch’ nature of leadership and the ‘high tech’ aspect of the workplace ... and demonstrated the link between person-centered transformational leadership and some technical construct, in this case knowledge management.* This is emphasized by Oluikpe (2015) who posited that the importance of knowledge management in the organization should include both the capabilities to enable the capture and leverage of intellectual capital and the deployment of this capital to the advantage of the organization. According to Martensson (2000) the term ‘intellectual capital’ is the preferred umbrella term because it refers to the possession of knowledge, applied experience, stakeholder relationships and professional skills which link to strategy. Based on the conceptual roots of intellectual capital identified by Edvinsson et al (1997), the strategic contribution of knowledge are based on the way in which knowledge is created or developed as well as the way it is leveraged into value. In spite of this realization, knowledge creation and development is mostly examined from the learning organization perspective; whereas it is argued that in order to create this value, it should also focus on ‘knowledge sharing’ to enhance the value and ultimately gives an organization a sustainable competitive advantage. One major issue that is hardly been dealt with, is the integration of knowledge from both perspectives where the focus shifts from individual perspectives to an emphasis on knowledge residing within the organization as a whole. For the purpose of this study, intellectual capital is linked to both strategic integrated communication, human and monetary sources needed for the processes and structures *in* the organization; and knowledge-based resources which include the management of leadership styles, technology, stakeholder relationships, innovation, creativity, participation, strategic intent and corporate culture *of* the organization. The importance of creativity, innovation, participation and culture are according to Chase (1998) the heart of creating successful knowledge organizations. Figure 2 presents a comparison of the main threads of the learning organization and the knowledge organization.

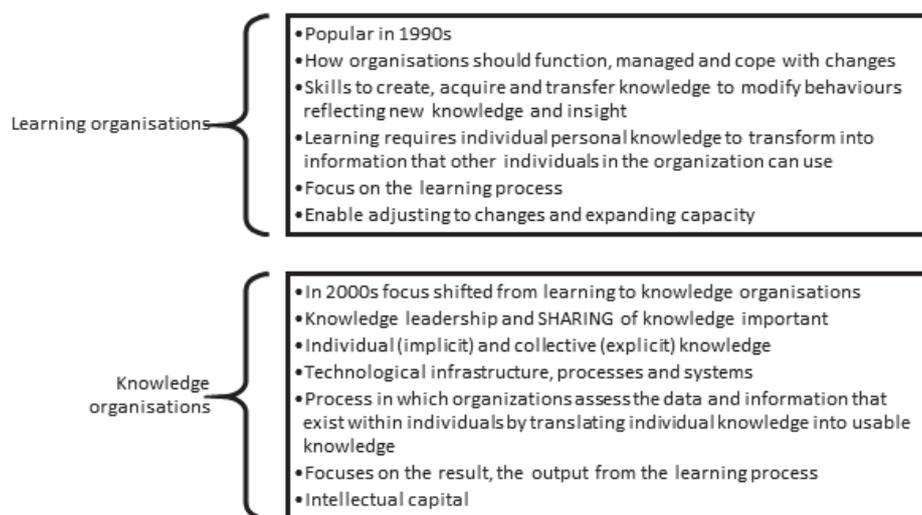


Figure 2: Learning organizations and knowledge organizations

Based on these arguments, the theoretical basis chosen for this paper is the *knowledge management approach.* In terms of the theoretical constructs, knowledge management includes three main components: technological

(systems), communication (strategic integrated communication) and human (stakeholders) (Barker, 2008). According to Bo (2013:4), *a knowledge-based view proposes that 'knowledge' is the strategically important resource of a firm*". This re-emphasizes the importance of the human component of knowledge management as one of the crucial aspects to determine organizational success motivated by active participating members of the organization in all activities. According to Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), the process of knowledge management is based on the ability of all members of the organization to add value to the [strategic] integrated communication business processes through the creation, communication, codification and coordination of both explicit and tacit knowledge storing. Tacit knowledge refers to *informal cognitive/mental and technical/concrete know-how and skills which are personal, context-specific and difficult to formalize or articulate because they are stored within the individual* (Van Dyk, Greeff and Barker, 2015:124). Bollinger and Smith (2001:46) see it as the *unarticulated knowledge that is in a person's head that is often difficult to describe and transfer*, which is arguably the key characteristic of emerging knowledge organizations. Because the focus of existing research is also on knowledge creation, codification and storing to the benefit of the organization, explicit knowledge refers to more formal and tangible, observable, precise and formally articulated and embedded in tools, processes and rules which are transferable through written documents (Nonaka, 1991). For the purpose of this paper and based on the argument that most existing research focuses on knowledge creation and storing, and less on *knowledge sharing*, this concept has been included as a focus area for this study. Where individual knowledge subsides within the human minds in terms of innovation, creativity, participation, skills and adaptability to change during transformation, organizational knowledge is formed through unique patterns of interactions, technologies, communication and humans which create and shape a unique organizational culture (Bath, 2001). To build a knowledge culture in a dynamic organization, it is argued that knowledge organizations should transform, develop and nurture systems and processes to ensure knowledge creation, storing, codification and sharing in a meaningful way to expand 'individual knowledge' (implicit) to 'collective organizational knowledge' (explicit) which can be interpreted and applied or used to ensure learning is created to clarify and adapt the strategic vision of the organization during change. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) also refer to embodied, tacit and narrative knowledge and the 'absent presence' of the body as an essential part of everyday communication because it allows for the creation and sharing of knowledge (Barker, 2013). In spite of the growing interest in knowledge management, it has been critiqued by researchers like Andreeva and Kianto (2012) for being too optimistic which promises more than what it can deliver and that it is difficult to manage knowledge. However, Massingham (2014) addressed these concerns in an empirical study using action research from a critical systems perspective and provided empirical evidence that knowledge management can be used to manage knowledge resources (strategic integrated communication, human, monetary and information-based) and that it can be used during organizational change in terms of performance, strategic alignment, knowledge retention to enhance productivity and knowledge creation and sharing to improve problem-solving, but agreed that it is difficult to implement.

6. Knowledge leadership

Since it was argued that emerging knowledge organizations are associated with adaptive approaches, the most prominent leadership theory used in the literature is usually the transformational approach. Transformational leadership emerged in the 1980s and was first defined by Burnes (1978:20) as a process in which "leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of mortality and motivation", where the process of transformation is based on empathy, understanding, insight and consideration; not manipulation, power or coercion. Notwithstanding the negative connotation of power in this sense, note should be taken that Foucault (1999) said in *Les Anormaux* (referring to the standardization process conducted during the twentieth century), that the rule carries a claim to power and that its role is not to exclude or refuse but, on the contrary, it is always linked to a positive technique of intervention and transformation. It is also important to remember that for Foucault (1982), power relations are deeply rooted in the social nexus; but a society without power relations can only be an abstraction. Based on existing literature (inter alia Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Crawford, 2005; Singh 2008; Donate and de Pablo, 2015), as well as additional viewpoints of the researcher, the main leadership styles are summarized in Table 1 to indicate the importance of a new knowledge leadership perspective.

Table 1: Main leadership approaches

Leadership styles	Key thrusts
Traditional leaders (trait, servant, leader-member exchange, etc.)	Rationality and control to maintain organizational goals, resources, structures and people (individual independent agents) No specific description of leadership behaviors to create high-quality relationships Abstract definitions

Leadership styles	Key thrusts
	No processes to address environmental changes, cultural differences, interpretation of information and strategic decision making
Contemporary leaders (charismatic, transactional, transformation, visionary, etc.)	Leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of mortality and motivation Emphasize values such as loyalty, equality, etc. Focus on empathy understanding, insight and consideration; not manipulation, power or coercion but motivate and empower followers (although power can also be used as a positive intervention in transformation) Four important skills: self-awareness, self-management, social involvement and relationship management
New knowledge leaders	Combine aspects of transformative and transactional leadership styles Act as role models and change agents by encouraging learning through and stimulate them intellectually, institutionalize learning through the provision of incentives and training, foster a pro-learning culture through cross-functional and –discipline engagement Intensify <i>explorative</i> initiatives by seeking to create new knowledge Encourage the willingness for <i>exploitation</i> practices which aim to leverage existing knowledge through storage, transfer, sharing and application Have a direct effect on the application of knowledge through <i>knowledge sharing</i> based on strategic integrated communication and the strategic intent of the organization Provide strategic visions, motivate others, communicate effectively, model good practices and carry out the knowledge agenda through interdependent relationships Religiously explain the goals of knowledge management to all concerned through interaction, vision, creativity, innovation and empowerment to create meaning

During the change process, Denrell (2005) came to the conclusion that leaders should comply to the following: empower individuals (like employees) to respond creatively; adopt personal and active attitudes towards individual and organizational goals to contribute to resonant leadership practices; should be self- and socially aware (and therefore be able to recognize, understand and react empathetically to his or her own and others' emotions and goals); be equipped with skills such as self- and relationship management (which are characterized by transparency, adaptability, collaboration and inspiration); should be associated with a supportive organizational climate due to a constructive organizational culture; and their role in the change process is to inspire people. This is in contrast to the traditional managerial approaches which focus mainly on rationality and control to maintain organizational goals, resources, structures and the people involved with these. Because knowledge management was presented as the theoretical foundation for this study, specifically the importance and role of change agents or experts which can manage all information at all levels (individual and organizational), the term knowledge leaders has been adopted and highlighted in the theoretical framework.

7. Theoretical framework

Based on the above discussion, the author constructed a new theoretical framework that focuses on the relationship between the key constructs discussed above which is presented in Figure 3.

From Figure 3 it is deduced that knowledge management allows for organizational strategies based on *structural* elements including intellectual capital, systems, processes and knowledge codification and storing in databases (technical component), *connectivity* through strategic integrated communication which is knowledge-information-meaning-based (communication component) and focused on *behavioral* aspects to ensure relationship building which should be culture-based to obtain trust, satisfaction, transparency and engagement by all (human component). It is argued that if tacit knowledge is made explicit, individual knowledge can be transferred, shared and used at all organizational levels. Due to the difficulty to transfer tacit and individually owned knowledge to explicit and organizational knowledge, the major contribution is that if knowledge leaders as change agents apply knowledge management, it will lead to greater possibilities to manage and control this knowledge effectively, especially during change and transformation.

It is hence posited that through the use of knowledge management, knowledge leaders can be used as change agents because it can either be described as an operational tool or a strategic tool. From a strategic perspective, knowledge management is firstly about the acquisition of information, secondly about the codification and storage of this information and knowledge in various databases which can be used for datamining, thirdly to make the information available and accessible to all hierarchical levels in the organization and lastly that this

information should be *shared and used* through sharing, socializing, externalization and exchange of information. In order to do this, participation becomes a key element to ensure the three components of knowledge management (technical, communication and human) are implemented through connectivity, structural and behavioral constructs. This will lead to creativity and innovation and knowledge leaders could emerge as change agents (experts) with the necessary skills to enhance decision-making, shared responsibility, relationship management and stewardship at all individual and organizational levels. This emphasizes the need for knowledge leaders to have a sound understanding of people, processes, systems, strategic visions, etc. of the organization; hence they should rely on strategic integrated communication to fulfil the roles of both collaborator and catalyst. It is argued that if these change agents or knowledge leaders respond to changes in the outside systems and borderless aggregates during transformation, knowledge organizations could be created. These knowledge organizations will then create a learning culture in line with the strategic vision through integration of both implicit and explicit knowledge. Hence reward systems and performance measure become important to ensure motivation takes place to empower people through knowledge application or use which will ultimately lead to cultural change. Lastly it is argued that in the long-term, this process will enhance the value of knowledge organizations, specifically in terms of its culture, knowledge creation and sharing to the benefit of all.

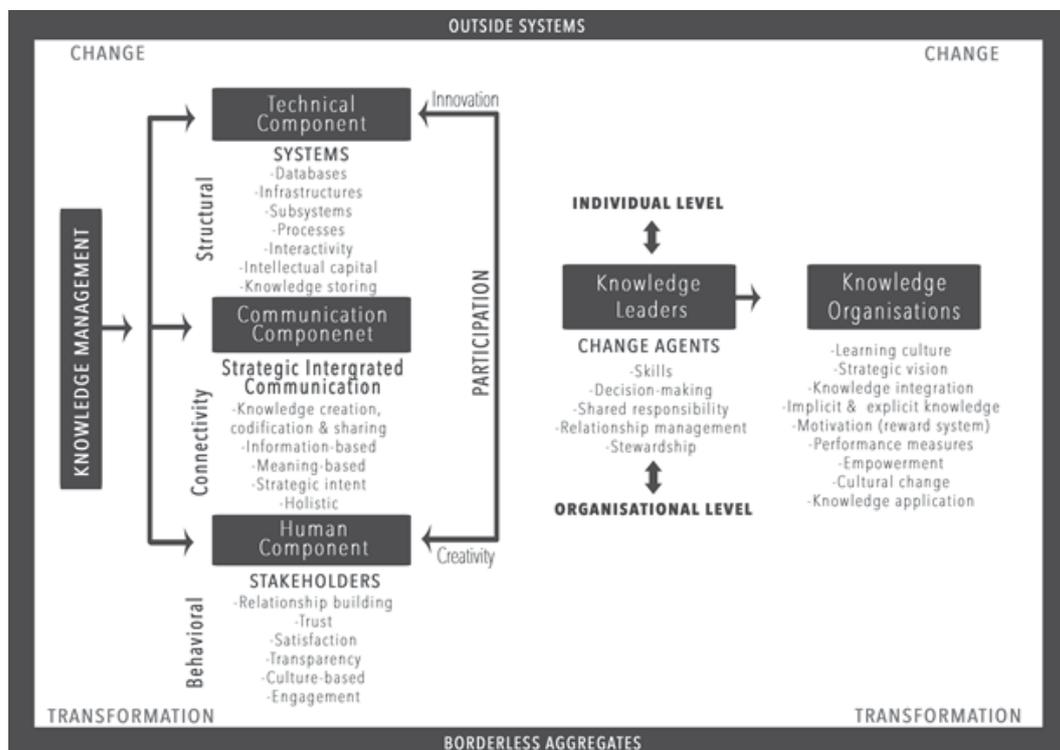


Figure 3: Theoretical framework for knowledge management as change agent to ensure the sustainability of emerging knowledge organizations

8. Limitations and future research

This research has limitations in its interpretations which are based on existing literature, the author's knowledge and interpretations thereof and the introduction of other viewpoints which indicate the importance of other avenues for further research. More rigorous research could be conducted, especially to refine and test these theoretical viewpoints in practice through the development of a measuring instrument for knowledge management which sets the scene for envisaged future research. Despite concerns on the use of knowledge management by knowledge leaders in emerging knowledge organizations, it is argued that the proposed theoretical framework is a good starting point to explain the knowledge-human-organization-relationship and could be a benchmark for more general studies.

9. Conclusion

In line with the main goal of the paper to examine how changes in the organizational environment can be managed, a theoretical framework was presented which indicated that knowledge management can present

knowledge leaders the opportunity to implement strategic integrated communication to ensure knowledge creation and sharing for sustainable relationship management through various systems and processes. It was emphasized that knowledge leaders should acknowledge the strategic intent and vision of these emerging knowledge organizations. These integrations were theoretically justified and compatible with existing viewpoints, but probably went one step further by contextualizing it in a comprehensive theoretical framework. The challenge for knowledge leaders is to develop an organizational culture conducive to the *sharing* of knowledge and where *learning* becomes the norm. While it is realized that it might be a little problematic to implement, it is argued that it can encourage and support a range of positive outcomes in the dynamic changing environment and transformations of organizations. However, research has yet to reveal whether it is indeed implementable because research-based evidence is needed to provide the expected outcomes. In spite of this, the importance of this paper is re-emphasized by the growing interest in knowledge management which has according to Olukpe (2015:351) *moved the topic from a relatively new discipline to an important strategic source for competitiveness.*

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