

University of Maryland Project Management Symposium
Knowledge Café: Unleashing Knowledge Culture & Learning Agility in a Project Economy

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ABSTRACT

By 2030, 76 million baby boomers will walk out of our organizations, taking decades of intellectual capital with them. Hyper-job mobility has a great loss of knowledge cost associated with it. Gallup estimates that millennial's turnover alone costs the US economy \$30.5 billion annually. Learning agility, versatility, feedback, making sense of our experience, and collaboration meet at the café and are woven into the fabric of high-performing organizations—these should not be cumbersome, but as simple as walking into a corner café. The café is a learning agility mindset and a space for creating the right environment for successful knowledge management. Fact: you can't force people to share their knowledge. So, you have to create the right knowledge environment—in a café—where knowledge workers are incentivized for a free exchange of knowledge and rejuvenated. Knowledge café construct can unleash a knowledge culture, learning agility in today's project economy.

Introduction

Knowledge café is a knowledge management technique like lessons learned or after-action review, expertise locator database, or community of practice. The café is used to engage a group to identify, learn, exchange, share, and unleash relational knowledge power. How powerful is the knowledge that is pigeonholed, unshared, unrejuvenated, and locked up in databases and the minds of project managers? There has never been a time when the need for increased knowledge flow, agility, simplicity, and relevance than now. Don't you wish there's a space to bring ideas, including our crazy ones, right up our alleys for other caffeinated visitors to test them out? Café is a knowledge exchange attitude for learning where reflective and generative dialogue and discourse are covenanted; debate and diatribe are intentional outside the ground rules. Organizational culture or environment eats any innovation, strategy, or dream like a hamburger. **Knowledge Café is learning, exchange mindset, and space that creates the right knowledge transfer environment in a project economy.** My goal for the café is to stimulate the appetite and curiosity for knowledge culture in all types of organizations. Some of the excerpts from my book, *The Knowledge Café: Creating an Environment for Successful Knowledge Management* (Anyacho, 2021).

SO, WHAT [THE HECK] IS A KNOWLEDGE CAFÉ?

A Knowledge Café is a mindset and an environment for engaging, discussing, and exchanging knowledge within a group, whether face-to-face or virtual. It's a knowledge experimentation town square where it's easier to share and reuse knowledge. Café is the environment that supports knowledge circulation and increases its velocity—“breeding” grounds for innovation. You may have practiced the café or some of its elements if you have engaged in the digital discussion board, enterprise knowledge wiki library, brown-bag

lunch meetings, unstructured serendipitous exchanges, and water cooler conversations. A debate has its place but is not sustainable. Today's toxic and hostile culture that prefers debate to dialogue calls us for dialogue—in a café. **No amount of knowledge will equate to understanding. Café enables understanding. Everyone has a voice at the café.**

The café space and mindset integrate face-to-face or virtual audio meetings with screen-sharing, whiteboarding/brainstorming, group chat for teams/projects, platforms for file sharing, social networking, collaborations, testing crazy ideas, idea generation, agile learning, honest questions, and answers (Anyacho, 2021, p2).

In the café orbit, we are

- Making sense of the world
- Making meaning of what we know or what we think we know
- Building relationships and understanding
- Creating new knowledge
- Building coherence, maybe even consensus
- Improving dialogue
- Surfacing problems and opportunities
- Breaking down silos
- Engaging in personal development
- Creating new knowledge
- Innovating
- Sense-making, which is its primary purpose or benefit (Anyacho, 2021, p10).

Km and conversational leadership father David Gurteen has been a forerunner of the Knowledge Café through his online book, *Conversational Leadership*. If you want to know what already exists in terms of knowledge, walk around the café and check out the floorplan before sitting down. Take a break from the business of the day—work along with some other creative minds in a café. According to May Wong (2014), walking can boost creative output by 60 percent. Enter the space where what the organization knows and what it should know intersects. As you determine the best spot to sit, let's clarify the meaning of the term *knowledge*.

Describing my book, *The Knowledge Café: Creating an Environment for Successful Knowledge Environment*, Denise A. D. Bedford, professor at Georgetown University, said, "Indeed, all curious knowledge workers need space and a mindset to bring our crazy ideas for others to test them out and deepen knowledge and understanding—The Café. Knowledge cafes are essential tools in any era, particularly in social distancing, where interactions and exchanges have become more intentional and deliberate. Everyone needs a knowledge café in their world today!" (Anyacho, 2021).

Why do we need café project knowledge?

Hard or costly-to-copy intellectual capitals of the firm are sources of business returns and the means to achieve superior performance and competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Rumelt, 1987; Conner, 1991, Prahalad and Hamel, 1990). Several thinkers agree that KM will symbolize the most considerable competitive advantage for organizations in the new millennium (Drucker, 1993; Quinn, 1992; Stewart, 1997; Toffler, 1990). I believe the knowledge transfer should be agile, simple, adaptive, iterative, and not cumbersome.

It should be as easy a walking into a street café to share your crazy ideas with like-minded

colleagues. Consider these facts:

- Knowledge culture creates a KM environment: you must be intentional, plan, and execute well, and make the process an organizational strategy
- For the first time in our lifetime, five generations interface in the project management space!
- Millennials will job-hop up to 20 times in their career—[Education Advisory Board](#)
- Organizations that are most effective at knowledge management improve project outcomes by nearly 35%—PMI 2015 Pulse of the Profession
- Employees get 50—75 percent of their relevant information directly from other people—*Gartner Group/CIBC World Markets*. Developing training doesn't guarantee a learning culture; a knowledge culture and café mindset do

WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT?

KM is a systematic approach for identifying, understanding and using knowledge to achieve organizational objectives and innovations. I have seen dozens of KM definitions; however, there's no single or agreed-upon definition of KM across the business, epistemology, social sciences, and psychology. In fact, author and professor John P. Girard gathered a collection of more than 100 KM definitions (Girard & Girard, 2015). If a concept like KM has so many definitions, it presupposes that it doesn't have a definition at all.

The Project Management Book of Knowledge (PMBOK) defines knowledge management: "It's all about making sure the skills, experiences, and expertise of the project team and other stakeholders are used before, during, and after the project" (*PMBOK® Guide*, sixth edition, 2017, p. 100).

The means by which an organization builds sustains and leverages the know-how and experience of its employees and partners to deliver its projects and services and manage the systems for which they are responsible.

National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP, 2014)

KNOWLEDGE CULTURE: CITY IMPACT ROUNDTABLE CONFERENCE

People choose not to change their behavior because the culture and the imperatives of the organization make it too difficult to act upon the knowledge. Michael Schrage

Etiologically, the word "culture" derives its meaning from a French term, which originally derives its meaning from another Latin word "colere," which means to tend to the earth and grow, or cultivation and nurture (Zimmermann, 2017). A culture is a way of life of a group of people—the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next. Culture can be a way of life or the midst of life. Structural capital is all about the knowledge within a group, community, or organization. Understand your group, city, or organization's prevailing culture if you want to create a KM environment.

I began to connect with nonprofit organizations in Austin, Texas, in 2002. Some of the nonprofits and compassion organizations in my network were feeding the homeless and taking care of the needy and helpless by responding to the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of those at the edge of society. Cities, communities, and nations, just like organizations, can have a lot going for them but lack a culture where knowledge, not just information and data, freely flows. In many cities, you have villages of silos. People cannot work together for a common cause because there's no knowledge-sharing space. What if

there were a space for those who knew a lot and those seeking to know, those who have ideas, and those looking for ideas to advance our communities to converge?

“Let me tell you a story about homeless boys at the café. One day I met Larry Ball. This man had about eight young men in his van. Larry told me that he picks up homeless kids from the street, gives them a home, rehabilitates and trains them, and sends them back as meaningful members of society. Some of them don’t even know their parents. He takes them to his house. His organization provides these young men with a home, care, and emotional and spiritual support to get them back on their feet. They are mentored, educated, and then seek jobs. They begin to earn a living and finally become independent. He replaces them with other homeless kids. I asked him, “What is your success rate?” His response was an outstanding 98 percent!

I asked Larry how he gets support in doing this full time. His answer: “I receive little or no support. I’ve never received grants or major donations. I believe that I’m called to do this, and it’s producing fantastic results.” I met people from several other nonprofits from 2003 to 2008 through the nonprofit I founded, Apostolic Bridge Builders, Inc. I was also connected with several industry leaders and people in government who sincerely appreciate the roles and success of nonprofits like Larry Ball’s Hungry for God organization. I thought that I needed to bring these knowledge players into a café meeting. I had several such knowledge exchange/connection meetings. Somewhere, I felt that we need to have an intentional roundtable conference to know what’s going on in different communities and how nonprofits, governments, and leaders of industry can come together in a Knowledge Café–style roundtable and share knowledge and build synergy for greater community transformation. I needed to have a café project for city transformation” (Anyacho, 2021, p158).

Whether an organization is expanding or contracting, scaling up or downsizing, business continuity, process improvement, performance, and knowledge innovation are the priorities. Organizations must focus on preserving critical and technical knowledge required to conduct business. When KM is part of the organization’s culture, performance improves, the competitive advantage accelerates, and competition becomes *coopetition*. Coopetition is cooperating with your competitors, building synergy so that everyone wins.

You can’t manage knowledge—nobody can. What you can do is manage the environment in which knowledge can be created, discovered, captured, shared, distilled, validated, transferred, adopted, adapted, and applied—Collison & Parcell (2005)

While we do not have control over our employees’ heads, we control the machines’ knowledge and their various formats. Most importantly, we control the knowledge transfer environment, the knowledge culture supported by a clear KM strategy and processes. A robust knowledge ecosystem requires organizational nourishment that fosters a knowledge-savvy workforce.

Here is a gentle caution: Your knowledge is not your job security. Your knowledge is your value—it only grows or generates a return when invested in the work and others and when others invest in you.

WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

The knowledge economy is not the quality of data or information that matters but conversion and accessibility and converting information to knowledge and contextualizing it for decision-making. In a knowledge society, the creation, dissemination, and utilization of information and knowledge has become the most critical production factor (Encyclopedia.com).

Most innovative economies are both knowledge economies and societies. An example is South Korea. Bloomberg ranked it as the most innovative country in 2019 (Jamrisko et al., 2019). Finland is another example of a knowledge economy. Finland has the widely acclaimed transformative capacity to become a leading knowledge-based economy in the late 20th century. It transformed from an agriculture-based economy in the 1950s into one of the top innovation-driven, knowledge-based economies and high-tech producers in the 21st century. I recommend the Knowledge Economic guidebook, Finland as a Knowledge Economic 2.0: Lessons on Policies and Governance (Unger, 2019). This is also mainly due to Nokia and strong government support of the tech industry.

The Right Condition and Environment That Attract People to the Knowledge Café

Everyone will come to the café if the following takes place:

- There's a grand rule that guarantees a dialogue, not a debate, and everyone has an equal voice.
- Everyone agrees to the why, what, when, and where of a café.
- There will be conversations, not a lecture.
- They have crazy ideas well up in their alleys they are dying to share.
- It's not a gathering of perfect ideas and too structured.
- Conversation is king.
- There's a space where people and systems talk *to* each other rather than *at* each other.
- There's a desire for simplicity.
- There's empathy rather than sympathy.
- They can leave sympathy behind and reconnoiter empathy.
- There's a willingness to learn agile.
- You see knowledge as a means of production.
- Hunger to steward and revivify knowledge.
- Third place: Café is that space outside home and office where one can collaborate.
- Fun: There's something that compliments a café experience (Anyacho, 2021, p9).

KNOWLEDGE WORKERS AT THE CAFÉ

In the digital age, you need to make knowledge workers out of every employee possible—Bill Gates.

Knowledge workers are neither farmers nor labor nor business; they are employees of organizations—Peter Drucker.

Knowledge workers are the creators and users of knowledge. Every employee and everyone who uses knowledge to do their work is a knowledge worker. While there are a variety of reasons to converge at a physical café, the purpose is to engage in knowledge exchange. Every knowledge worker depends on the free flow of information to do his or her work. Let's café. It means let's begin the discussion. Let's talk about it. Let's share what we know. Let's brainstorm. Let's get caffeinated. Let's analyze what we have around

a saucer. Let's bring all this information into context. Can we bring the human element into it? Can we apply the knowledge we have acquired for discussion-making? The minder of the café is synonymous with sharing.

Several years ago, I managed a project and needed to organize project assets, processes, and policies; I searched the intranet of lessons learned repositories. I realized that every team had its repository for lessons learned and new knowledge from the café. I then searched our organization's intranet for a project template. Believe it or not, the result was fantastic, probably more than 10,000 results of everything but a project charter! Sometimes, it's like we are all swimming in a directionless swamp or pond (Anyacho, 2021, p130). This is a perfect definition of what knowledge management should not be to the knowledge worker. We need an intentional and clear-flowing river that has a direction and clarity of perception. Could it be that we had documented knowledge scattered across many repositories without managing the knowledge within the documents? It was not tagged, curated, filtered, rated, prioritized, synthesized, or combined into new documents such as guidance, best practices, or wiki content.

When I finally created templates for project management, I realized weeks later that other knowledge users in my organization had created similar templates. Knowledge workers work best with a free flow of information. This helped to ignite my passion for a paradigm shift in the way knowledge users use information. There was a need for a café for different repositories, content, organization, curation, and indexing in hindsight. A café relational mindset will make the information available one or two clicks away.

Every stakeholder is a knowledge user. Project managers and, indeed, all knowledge workers are the users of the project information and knowledge. That's why we need to get people thinking in a café way. Dr. Ed Hoffman, a strategic advisor to the Project Management Institute and senior lecturer at the Columbia University School of Professional Studies, has a motto: "People, People, People." People are the most crucial leg of your KM program.

Knowledge sharing is infectious! Knowledge workers are part of the precious assets of the organization. The most critical knowledge assets of an organization are human capital.

More than 80% of a company's information exists on individual hard drives and in personal files—Gartner (n.d.)

Some employees believe that sharing knowledge is additional work for them. Therefore, they think that it is a waste of time to make information available to other knowledge users or transfer their knowledge to others.

At TxDOT, during our KM development, we identified 50+ communities of practice, developed a knowledge interview program, and held regular Knowledge Café events that have attracted participation of 90 percent of knowledge managers from its 59 divisions and districts. The reason for the first knowledge fairs and cafés we had was to bring these CoPs together for knowledge exchange.

What Happens at a Café?

Knowledge conversations. As said in the preface of my book, *The Knowledge Cafe*, knowledge creation, and transfer are incomplete without socialization and cross-pollination of knowledge from one state to another—when knowledge workers talk to each other and machines talk to each other, and when knowledge constantly changes states (Anyacho, 2021).

Nonaka and Takeuchi introduced the SECI model (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1996), which has become the cornerstone of knowledge creation and transfer theory, and Nonaka (1994) identified four mechanisms for knowledge creation:

1. Socialization: whereby an individual shares tacit (intuitive) knowledge like know-hows, know-whats, and know-whys—those personal knowledge used by knowledge workers to perform their work often makes sense only in their worlds. Sharing of experiences through observation, imitation, and practice.
2. Combination: whereby one piece of explicit knowledge like the knowledge that can be captured in the form of text, tables, diagrams, product specifications is combined with other;
3. Externalization: a process whereby tacit knowledge is made explicit; and
4. Internalization: a process of experiencing knowledge through an explicit source, where explicit knowledge is converted into tacit.

We want to make sense or meaning of our world, what we know, right? We want that “aha!” moment that doesn’t happen in instructions or one-dimensional settings. “Aha!” moments occur in dialogue, conversation, and a peer-learning knowledge exchange environment. The café is the space for this” (Anyacho, 2021, p8).

We ask lots of questions at the café. Richard Thalheimer, the founder of Sharper Image, once asserted, “It is better to look uninformed than to be uninformed. Curb your ego & keep asking questions” (Close & Close, 2018).

Ground Rules at the café

“Café ground rules are among the differentiating factors between knowledge café and other forms of knowledge exchange engagement. They provide clarity and rules of engagement. It sets the expectation of the conversation, so there are no surprises. If you don’t have ground rules, everyone creates theirs because nature abhors a vacuum. Would you want to play a game where there are no rules, or you make the rules as you go? (Anyacho, 2021, p19). I hope not. That will suffice for a debate, not a dialogue. There will be fears, insecurities, and people who don’t like to be vulnerable unless they agree to protect everyone.

Critical Elements of a Café

- Driven by a **powerful question dialogue, not a debate**
- Preserves **conversational** flow
- **Everyone has an equal voice**
- **Eliminates fear** of judgment or rejection
- **No preconceived outcomes**
- Does **not** allow **coercion**
- Deliverable is the **new learning**
- We are all in the learning process.

GURTEEN’S CAFÉ GUIDE

The café usually runs for 1½–2 hours depending on how much time is available, but never less than one hour. The only hard and fast rule is that most of the time is spent in conversation—it is not about one person presenting to the group. The value of the café is in

the conversation itself and the learning that each individual takes away. Here is a typical Gurteen café session format.

1. The facilitator or host may give a presentation on what Knowledge Cafés are about and the role of conversation in business life (about 5 minutes)
2. One hour with a few conversational exercises, unless participants are already familiar with the concept of the café
3. The facilitator welcomes people to the café (about 5 minutes)
4. The facilitator spends 10–15 minutes outlining the subject or theme of the café and poses a single open-ended question. For example, if the theme is knowledge sharing, then the question for the group might be, “What are the barriers to knowledge sharing in an organization, and how do you overcome them?”
5. The group breaks into small groups of 3 or 4 (no more than 5) and discusses the questions for about 45 minutes, then comes back together as a whole group for the final 45 minutes, when the individual groups share their thoughts. If the café is a one-question café, it’s appropriate for small table discussants to rotate from their tables every 15 minutes.
6. Optionally, in the small group sessions, people change tables every 15 minutes to broaden the number of people they get to interact with and thus the differing perspectives of the group
7. Usually, no attempt is made to capture the conversation, as doing so tends to destroy the conversation. In some circumstances, it makes sense to capture things from the café depending on its purpose, and there are ways of doing this that minimally interfere with the dynamics of the conversation.

ANYACHO’S ENHANCED PROCEDURE FOR A KNOWLEDGE CAFÉ EVENT

To enhance the café as described by Gurteen, I recommend these procedures. You need to plan and have an objective and expectation that will be measured against the outcome of a café or fair event. At the café, everyone’s voice counts, fear is eliminated, and the environment preserves the conversational flow.

1. Walking into the café is like walking into any networking event. You get to know other knowledge-curious animals. Warning: Most people are not conversational whizzes. You have to make them talk.
2. Café can be face-to-face or virtual. Virtual café is a challenge since you have to log into different sessions and come back for plenary sessions.
3. Have a communication and training strategy; identify champions, experts, super users, or early adopters in the business who face similar knowledge and information challenges.
4. Choose a timekeeper and notetaker.
5. Choose your table. The café is better at tables. Allowing about 4–6 people at a table gives everyone at a table an opportunity to contribute. Everyone at the café should be able to share their knowledge. It helps to announce that people should choose a table after the first set of networking. I like to give attendees the first 15 minutes for

networking or use icebreakers. I encourage attendees from the same office to sit at different tables.

6. Participants can choose to sit, stand, or even sit on the floor. This is okay if everyone is comfortable and especially if this is an unstructured café.
7. Break the café into sessions or parts. When I have a 2-hour café, I break it down to three 45-minute sections or parts, according to the expectations or objectives of the café.
8. Café discussions are mostly held at the small table meeting, even though there are opportunities for general discussions after short table café exchanges. I've had several virtual cafes as a result of COVID-19. I used the chat section to encourage responses and made sure that everyone contributed in a café.
9. Collect notes and summaries from the tables: There is a designated notetaker for each table. Summaries of the discussions from the tables are collected at the end of each question discussed for everyone to be enriched from all small-group discussions.
10. Share best practice in terms of how to communicate with employees and reinforce the knowledge-sharing behaviors.
11. Compile knowledge-exchange notes, and new knowledge that emerges from fair and café are distributed through push and pull communication methods. These notes and summaries from the table are useful for the entire knowledge community, especially those who couldn't participate. I usually send out these notes to the whole of the knowledge community and post them on the Knowledge Café site (Wiki site) for the community.

Knowledge café will stir your curiosity for knowledge stewardship. Knowledge Café is my preferred technique or methodology to start the KM process—to bring people who know something and those who desire to know more to collaborate and broker intelligent ideas and share knowledge.

As a project manager, I always distribute a meeting agenda, including a column for action items. In the knowledge café, there is so much feedback, learning, sharing, and reinvigoration that takes place. In today's world of breathtaking changes, where we drink from a fire hose of information, constant and quick learning of new things, openness to new ideas, and adaptation are the sine qua non and necessary skills. Manage your knowledge or become irrelevant! Knowledge Café is the most logical mindset and space to begin KM exploration to increase knowledge interaction, metamorphosis, agility, exchange, velocity, findability, shareability, and usability. (Anyacho, 2021, p253).

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