

Words of Wisdom: An Interview with Melinda Bickerstaff

By John P. Girard, PhD

Introduction

Melinda Bickerstaff, former Vice President of Knowledge Management at Bristol-Myers Squibb, is one of the real champions of knowledge management in action. She is a very experienced executive who knows, first hand, how organizations may reap the benefits of creating and exchanging organizational knowledge. Her knowledge in this domain is a somewhat unique as it is based on a blend of theory and practice. She is extremely well read which may contribute to her successes; however, her real gift is the ability to quickly analyze organizational challenges and then find innovation knowledge based solutions. Equally impressive is her ability to motivate and lead her team.

Recently I had the opportunity to chat with Melinda about her experiences in knowledge management. Below are the highlights of the interview.

The Interview

John Girard [JG]: Thank you again for taking the time to chat with me today. I thought we could start by talking about your achievements as Vice President of Knowledge Management at Bristol-Myers Squibb.

Melinda Bickerstaff [MB]: Yes, it's an interesting question; I think the position has really evolved over time. I think because managing knowledge intentionally was probably new to Bristol when I came in March of 2001. My boss then, who brought me in and the President of our Pharmaceutical Research Institute said we're not quite sure what this is, we have a lot of enabled technology now and a lot of data and information moving around, so someone better figure out how to manage it. I know we probably need this role but I'm not quite sure what this person will do, but we need somebody to do this.

MB: By bringing me in at the level that they brought me in, they really put a stake in the ground and said you know, we're serious about this. When I came in, my challenge

was to define how this was going to be operationalized for Bristol-Myers Squibb, this thing called knowledge management. Of course, if you run around the company and you say, do you know what knowledge management can do for you; you get these glazed looks, right?

MB: When I first came in, my challenge was to listen, to ask good questions and figure out what business problems kept people awake at night where managing knowledge intentionally could possibly solve the problems, and if it couldn't, I would have gone someplace else and looked for other problems. My role then was really to ask good questions, the right questions. Instead of coming in and going around talking to 20 or 30 people and saying what can knowledge management do for you? Such a deal I have for you, I'm here. Of course, they'd say, well I don't know. Instead, I'd ask them what kept them awake at night and what they worried about. Then I began to see some themes emerging and I would tell people, this is what I heard from somebody else and this seemed to be the

theme . . . so I got a real sense of the current business problems. By starting out that way, we began to position KM as a business problem solver. My role was to create a role and be seen as leading an emerging function that helped solve critical problems. Today, we are solving many problems so my role has shifted from I don't have to position myself as a business problem solver. Today we're figuring out with a small Team which are the ones we can solve and have the greatest impact. That's a nice place to be.

JG: That's a very interesting overview. Now in some organizations your position might be called a Chief Knowledge Officer or CKO. There's been a lot of discussion about the need for a CKO. Do you think the title is important or as a Vice President are you seen to be high enough in the hierarchy to really solve these problems that you are talking about?

MB: Vice President is fine. People do refer to me as a Chief Knowledge Officer but I don't. I think to be one of 200 executives in the R&D organization, one of 300 in the corporation out of 44,000 employees, my boss and the President were smart to position it at a level that says this is a seasoned player, and this is a function that we need to mature within our organization. If they had brought me in at a lower level, it probably would have taken much longer to have an impact.

JG: You know that I like to describe enablers of knowledge management as three things, technology, leadership, and culture and I often refer to them as the TLC of KM. I wonder if you have any examples of how technology, leadership, or culture have either helped or hindered the knowledge transfer, or the way you put it, to help or hinder solving these business problems?

MB: I think your TLC is probably pretty correct. Let's take leadership to begin with. In terms of solving problems, leadership has to identify them. It doesn't matter if I identify them, they're their problems not mine. In my role, I'm not necessarily in an infrastructure role but I think the role that I play is as an integrator, to bring various parts of the organization in to solve the problem. I step into the white places to bring the silos together because that's part of what managing knowledge is about - working across the silos. We play in that space, so I think the critical piece of your triangle is leadership acknowledging that there is a problem, that they're worried about something. If they don't do that it doesn't matter how much you think it is a problem, you are not going to get their attention.

MB: I worked in two of the *Big 4* organizations, Deloitte & Touche and KPMG Consulting, Inc. and I actually built the knowledge management practice in KPMG, the external practice serving clients. I think technology has done a disservice to knowledge management. The way that I think about that is all these consulting organizations latched on to technology as the silver bullet for everyone's knowledge management solution. Executives bought it and they spent a lot of money and it didn't work. It generally takes three years for an organization to recover from a bad experience with technology, and then you have another shot, to come back around. Technology is such a terrific enabler and technology has created this issue around so much stuff is now available and yet to think that it's simply a technology solution, which you know consulting organizations sold that because that's what they sell. It's a lot easier to sell a piece of software than it is to sell change, which is culture change, or dealing with human beings who are messy.

They took the easy way out and they hurt our emerging field by doing that.

JG: Now you mention culture, I don't think it would be a surprise to a lot of people that the pharmaceutical industry isn't really known for its culture of sharing. You tend to have very close knit groups and especially in the R & D environment. It truly is knowledge is power sometimes. So was that a challenge for you to you try to mold the culture to incorporate "sharing" as a best practice?

MB: Well, you do it in a culture like this John, with a limited domain. In other words, if you, again I'll go back to, if you're solving a business problem then if its an issue of sharing information between marketing and science, the business problem wins out and the cultural boundaries go away because its about, do you need this? Yes. Do you need this information? Yes. Well why aren't we sharing? Yeah, you're right I guess we should share it, and then we could work on it. If it's in the context of the boundaries around the silos, they'll never share. The problem here is in most companies the way we did enabling technology was we built them in silos.

MB: It isn't easy; we don't yet have the technology platforms to share knowledge between our silos, between science and marketing. So we're just now coming to the place of figuring that out. The way the budgetary process works in most organizations is siloed. They request money for technology and technology systems and then they build them on their own technology platform. They don't care if the silo next door, which is marketing, has a different platform. It's taken awhile for our company to mature in the technology space to say, we want to be a collaborative company. Just what does that mean? What are the barriers to being collaborative?

We're just now asking those questions. Well you know, marketing can't speak easily to science, science can't speak easily to manufacturing. We're just now in that place of trying to fix that. Those are two instances where technology is the good news and technology is the bad news.

JG: It seems to me that what you are saying is that you can always go back to solving the business problem, so you're not doing KM for KM's sake but that you've got an aim and that's to solve the problem. So when you talk about some of these issues with your colleagues, I'm sure it makes it easier to emphasize the importance of it.

MB: Yes that's the neutralizer, I mean no one can fight City Hall, it could be for the benefit of the patient, it could be for getting information to the FDA, and you say oh yeah I guess that's right we're all in this game, right. Then the boundaries go away when you approach it that way. That's why you really have to approach it that way or you'll never get out of the silos with one another.

JG: You mentioned a couple of times the importance of people and the people to people collaboration in this. You know our good friend Carla O'Dell, President of APQC has suggested that something like 80% of organizational knowledge is tacit knowledge and that this knowledge goes home at night. What are you doing at BMS to try to, what techniques or tools do you have to try to either capture or protect or guard that corporate resource, that tacit knowledge of your many bright employees?

MB: Well we made a conscious decision in 2001 when we really decided to have a more formal KM effort. It wasn't that the company wasn't already managing its knowledge; it just wanted to do it more intentionally. We made a conscious choice

not to lead with technology, but to see it as an enabler. Our conscious choice was that we believed that 80% of what BMS knew went home every night, so our efforts would be around figuring out what we know, who knows it and developing ways to share critical knowledge with people who need it when they need it.

MB: Some of the things that we have done are specific interventions which are around creating a formal lessons learned service, which is the transfer of good and best practices, from someone who just did something to someone who's going to do it next. We use story or narrative, as you know, widely as a way of communicating complex ideas. We are heavily into the transfer aspect of: if someone has done something and the team is going to do it in a year from now, to make sure that they learn from the team that just did it. It's a very labor intensive effort. Those are probably two of the things that we are currently doing quite a bit of.

JG: You mentioned good and best practices, do you distinguish between the two, or is that a concept that is a synergy of the two or them?

MB: You know that Carla and APQC describe best practices, they're never really best practices, and they're good practices that happen to work right now. You know that we have been called a best practice partner in virtual collaboration. What that means is for the time and the circumstances that we have, it really works for us. We might change it in a year. A practice is a good practice that works for now and is always emerging. So I am just reluctant to ever call it a best practice because best practices get put on pedestals and someone tries to replicate it in another place and they usually can't do it.

JG: Yes, those are words of wisdom, for sure. Now I remember that you were the recipient of your President's award for your contribution in knowledge capture and retention during the acquisition of, I think it was DuPont Pharmaceuticals, and that's a great story in itself. Congratulations for receiving that honor, but as you look back now, is there anything you could have done better or were you happy with the way the whole capture process worked?

MB: Let me tell you what happened and then what the rerun would be. When it was announced that we bought DuPont, which was the largest purchase in the history of the company for \$7.8 billion dollars. This deal was announced in June, 2001 and we closed the deal in October, 2001 and wanted to finish the integration by year-end in December, 2001. Now, we never actually knew when we were going to close, because when you do these things, as you know, you have FCC requirements and as soon as you announce, you can't talk to the company you just bought. You can't talk to them about anything real. You can talk to them about all the public information, but the proprietary information about molecules, at what stage you are in clinical trials; the things that would help us decide on assets. You couldn't talk to them about.

MB: The way we chose to do this integration was like most companies do integration, they hire a whole slew of consultants. We had the Boston Consulting Group, Deloitte & Touche, Mercer - Delta we had four or five sets of Big Four and smaller consulting groups here as well. The first meeting we had of all the consultants and they defined specific work streams. It's the marketing work stream, it's the financial work stream, it's the oncology, it's this, it's this, and it's this, okay. They even had a KM work stream. They called this where huge charts because they had done this

before and they listed what the oncology work stream was going to do and the marketing and the sales, etc. Then for KM, they had just this blank and nothing underneath.

MB: I raised my hand and I said, what's this and they said well that's why you're here, you're here to try to figure this out because we're not sure what this means. And they said that the people who are running this project told them that the greatest risk to this purchase is "knowledge loss" and we don't know what to do about it. So I said OK, I guess we can figure this out. What we tried to do was to go to each of the consultant-identified work stream to bring in a knowledge view, but we lost the timing to do that because the consultants had their templates ready and they were off and running with each of the work streams.

MB: Now just picture this, for four weeks they were off and running with their templates going to each work stream saying you need to collect this and you need to collect this and then another consulting group saying you need to collect this and there was no integration. The work streams had at least four different groups telling them what they needed to collect in probably about a two and a half week period. By the time I could get my small group organized, the work streams were so inundated with information collection templates; they didn't want to hear and couldn't hear anything about knowledge loss.

MB: I went after oncology, I went after marketing and I went after neuroscience and we really tried to get in. We were asking really interesting questions like: What do you need to know to make this asset decision? Where would you find it here? Where would you find it there? What format is it in? Is it in a data base? Is it in a

process? Is it in a person? A project manager? They couldn't even hear me even though these questions were simple and easy to understand. The templates they had from all the other consultants were so complicated; they were all on template overload! So, I gave up and I said I can't get in. What I did was, I went to the end, and I said, what will these work streams need whenever we actually close this deal? Because the day we close means we can really go after the proprietary information needed to make the asset and human decisions. And then about eight days later, we'll probably have to make the asset decision and ten days later we'll probably have to make the human decision. We were trying to bring this thing in by the end of the year in December, 2001.

MB: So, we went to the end and worked backwards. When we went to the end, it changed the way we thought about knowledge capture. We said, when these people can finally speak to each other, how are they going to speak? What questions are they going to ask? They're going to need some guidance and some training because the DuPont colleagues they are going to be talking to have no idea if they will have a job in the future with the new company.. Between June and October, there were so many recruiters in Wilmington Delaware, actively recruiting the best and the brightest whom we couldn't speak to. How could we keep them interested in staying on with BMS?

MB: So in July, we go to our DuPont colleagues and say that when we close, which we hope is in August or September, we want to conduct a formal scientific review of assets and we want you to begin to prepare for it. This is the template, these are the guidelines. What we wanted them to do was tell us the stories of their work and their products. Everyone was dying to tell

their story and they were glad to have something to do rather than just waiting around to be fired or hired. We created templates for them to work on to present on the day we closed. We closed on October 1st.

MB: The very next day, we had briefings and stories and collegial exchanges for two solid weeks at DuPont on site. In the evenings we would pull our scientists together and we would say, tell me what you learned, what else do you need to know, where do you find it. Their charge was to go get the information they needed the next day. At the end of two or three days, they said we have the information we need to make the asset decisions just eight days after close. Now the question was: What information do you need to make the human decision? This is what I need, let's go ahead and get it. The human decisions were made just ten days after close. And the integrations were officially completed on December 30, 2001, making it the fastest integration in the history of the industry. This was a very intense process that involved human resources, learning and development, training and OD and the KM support team on site with all our scientists.

MB: We spent the entire month of August training all of our scientists (about 900 professionals) on how to do this knowledge capture work for themselves; how to be sensitive to people who were really nervous about the future of their jobs, and how to get the information they needed. So, if I had to do a rerun, I wouldn't want to go to the end again. Instead, I would want to start at the beginning and give the work streams our simple knowledge capture templates before the consultants would deluge them with theirs. If I could do a rerun, I would have gotten in there before all the consultants got showed up. They just made everyone absolutely crazy... template nuts! The consultants took over our process. They led

the process, rather than us leading it. I kept talking about this effort as the train leaving the station and I was continually chasing it. I decided to stop chasing the train and instead go to the train's destination point. We called this point Philadelphia just as a point of reference implying that train was heading from Princeton (our location to Philadelphia, the end of this effort. So we went to Philadelphia and figured out what the work streams were going to need to make the asset and human decisions when they arrived and then worked our way backwards towards those goals. That's what we did and it worked. If I could do a rerun I would do it in the beginning because it would have been much simpler than what we did. I kept saying if we capture 60% of what we needed to make the asset and human decisions, we would be lucky. And I believe we did.

JG: Well back, just last year, you folks were recognized as being a leading company in the knowledge-intensive pharmaceutical industry. I know you also were a North American finalist in the 2004 Most Admired Knowledge Enterprise or (MAKE) Award. So congratulations on that as well, I think that was quite a milestone for you. I know it was a personal ambition to be acknowledged. Can you tell me why that recognition is important to BMS either at the macro level for your entire company or maybe at the micro level for your team the people directly involved. How does the recognition help support your Knowledge Management work?

MB: Well, I think from the macro level, we are in an industry that is absolutely under siege from the public, regulatory agencies, etc.. We are so under fire, you just have to pick up any daily newspaper to see that. Therefore, any positive recognition that comes from how we are operating or doing our work, is always appreciated by

our Senior Management. I think that kind of acknowledgment is important. What is interesting is the APQC, as you know, is the world's leading benchmarking organization. It has been doing a lot of work in this space for the last decade. A lot of companies that are getting started in KM call APQC and ask can you help us get started? And APQC does have a small consulting arm to assist. The inquiring company might ask, tell me who we should learn from, this is what we want to do.

MB: Recently, one of our partner companies (Otsuka Pharmaceuticals) called APQC and said we want to get started in KM and we don't have a clue where to start. We think we want to create communities and we also want to do something around a lessons learned process. APQC began to work with them then said you know, you probably should talk to your partner, and they said who? Well, BMS because they've been recognized as a leader in collaboration, virtual collaboration and they also have a very robust lessons learned service and process.

MB: So Otsuka called us and we scheduled exchanges and site visits for them to come and learn from us. As the executives at BMS would say, they're coming to us in a neutral space. It's not around a product, it's not around a business relationship, it's about learning from us, and that can only further enhance our relationship. The President of our Research Institute and the head of our Regulatory organization both want to be involved in these site visits. It's a neutral space, and we're going to do whatever we need to do to help them get started in KM to be successful. This connection came about through this recognition as a "best practice" partner, particularly within our industry.. There have been a number of other companies that have been sent our way for

whom we've conducted similar exchanges and site visits. We are glad to share.

JG: Melinda, thank you so much for chatting with us today. I truly appreciate your honest answers and I know that your generous sharing will help many of us achieve our organizational goals. Thanks very much.

About Melinda Bickerstaff

Melinda has recently accepted a position as Senior Vice President –Learning and Development for Discovery Communications, Inc, the world's leading real-world media company with headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland. As the Chief Learning Officer (CLO), she continues to create and share organizational knowledge from the learning platform. She can be reached at:

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