# Relatedness and Futureness: Key Pillars for Developing Knowledge-Based Management for Sustainability

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**Abstract:** Recently, the field of Knowledge Management has seen some movements towards sustainability and more responsible business practices. Especially sustainability has become a hot topic for almost every organization. In this paper, we try to locate the concept of sustainability in the field of Knowledge Management. We argue that lived sustainability is built upon relatedness (the holistic understanding of interdependence and interconnectedness of complex systems) and futureness (adopting a long-term perspective for the management of organizations) that together promote sustainable organizing from the inside-out. We find that in particular two streams, Responsible Knowledge Management and Spiritual Knowledge Management, have taken up ideas that potentially lead to sustainable Knowledge-based Management. Those streams emphasize various forms of non-rational knowledge as a necessary, but previously underrepresented aspect of knowledge, as a counterpart to the instrumental-calculative rationality that has become predominant in the study of organizations and organizational knowledge.

**Keywords:** Future of KM, Spiritual knowledge management, Responsible knowledge management, Sustainability, Tacit knowledge

# 1. Introduction

Sustainability has become a societal imperative that companies must meet. It is time to rethink the role of knowledge management and shift the focus from managing a stock of knowledge (Bratianu, 2011) to providing a management tool that enables doing "the right things" (Laszlo & Laszlo, 2007, p. 494).

To contribute to this endeavour, we analyse key literature on sustainability and identify relatedness and futureness as two key characteristics of the concept. Relatedness refers to the complexity of systems, which requires a holistic understanding of their "interdependence" and "interconnectivity" (Bansal & Song, 2017, p. 123). This underscores that "corporate actions [are] inherently connected to the social and natural systems" (Bansal & Song, 2017, p. 124). Consequently, "sustainable development rests on three principles: environmental integrity, social equity, and economic prosperity" (Scherer et al., 2013, p. 259). This highlights that we are not alone but related to others. We should know about our relationships, which means we should know about ourselves, 'the others' (i.e., humans, nonhumans, more-than-humans), mechanisms, and consequences.

Managing an organization sustainably also means "not just to manage resources at a point in time but manage resources across time" (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014, p. 76). Therefore, decision makers need to "fully anticipate [stakeholders'] future needs" (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014, p. 72). They have to adopt a long-term perspective that contrasts with short-termism, which can be defined as "decisions and outcomes that pursue a course of action that is best for the short term but suboptimal over the long run" (Laverty, 1996, p. 826). We refer to this characteristic of sustainability as futureness.

In this conceptual paper, we identify two avenues to knowledge-based management for sustainability. We introduce two approaches for a knowledge-based management for sustainability agenda, i.e., Responsible Knowledge Management (Durst, 2021; Rocha et al., 2022) and Spiritual Knowledge Management (Kaiser, 2023). Both address the characteristics of relatedness and futureness, thus delivering on the sustainability agenda. In doing so, we argue, knowledge management holds the potential to become a key tool for organizations to learn how to do "the right things" from a long-term perspective on sustainability.

# 2. Sustainability and Knowledge Management

Sustainability has become a social imperative that companies must meet. As a result, it is making its way into all levels and functions of organisations (Lubin & Esty, 2010), the backbone of which is knowledge. Knowledge management has evolved as a response to the infobesity brought about by advances in information technology (Davenport, 2015). Now that we have a solid handle on information processing, it is time to rethink the role of knowledge management in the organisation - and beyond. In other words, shifting the emphasis from managing a stock of knowledge (Bratianu, 2011) towards the question: "will KM [knowledge management] become yet

another approach to help organisations do things right, or will it be a vehicle for government, business and civil society to do the right things?" (Laszlo & Laszlo, 2007, p. 494) In this paper, we answer this question and conceptually identify two avenues to knowledge-based management for sustainability, namely responsible knowledge management (Durst, 2021; Rocha et al., 2022) and spiritual knowledge management (Kaiser, 2023).

Sustainable development has its roots in the late 1960s, although first broadly discussed in the "The Limits to Growth" report by the Club of Rome (Meadows et al., 1972). From then on, several international publications shaped the discussion on sustainability, sustainable development, and sustainable business. Among those is the World Commission on Environment and Development report "Our Common Future" (OCFR) (United Nations, 1987), that has bred the ground for the most recent global sustainability framework, the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (Hák et al., 2016),

Bansal & Song (2017) argue that the OCFR adopts a systems perspective to sustainable development. This means that it regards the world "as a complex system with six interlocking challenges" (p. 123). This shifts the emphasis from "characteristics of elements to the dynamics of connectivity" (p. 124); systems are not linear but complex which makes it necessary to holistically understand "interdependence" and "interconnectivity" (p. 123). This emphasises that "corporate actions [are] inherently connected to the social and natural systems" (p. 124). Consequently, "sustainable development rests on three principles: environmental integrity, social equity, and economic prosperity" (Scherer et al., 2013, p. 259). This highlights that we are not alone, but related to others. Following the logic of systems science, all our (corporate) acting is influenced and influences the entities to which we are related; may it be others in personal and emotional spatial proximity (e.g., family, colleagues) or distances (e.g., society, future generations), the living Earth (e.g., exploitation of natural resources, climate change, pollution), or supra-physical entities (e.g., the universe, God). We should know about our relatedness, which implies we should know about us, 'the others' (i.e., humans, nonhumans, more-than-humans), mechanisms, and consequences. We term this characteristic of sustainability *relatedness*.

Among the most cited definitions on sustainable development is "[meeting] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations, 1987). It points to the inter-generational focus, reflecting the tension between the present and the future. It calls for not trading future possibilities for current demands. So, time, or more specifically future-orientation is a key feature of (business) sustainability (Kim et al., 2019; Slawinski & Bansal, 2015). Along this line, Lozano (2008) highlights the "dynamic time perspectives" that characterise sustainable development, and argues that the social, environmental, and economic aspects holistically interact with each other through time. The resulting challenge for leaders is to "not just to manage resources at a point in time, but manage resources across time" (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014, p. 76). Therefore, decision makers need to "fully anticipate [stakeholders'] future needs" (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014, p. 72). They have to adopt a long-term perspective that contrasts with short-termism, which can be defined as "decisions and outcomes that pursue a course of action that is best for the short term but suboptimal over the long run" (Laverty, 1996, p. 826). Future-oriented communications (Crilly, 2017) and a "future-time framing perspective" (Liang et al., 2018) can be key to do so. We term this characteristic of sustainability futureness.

Hence, we can identify relatedness and futureness as two key characteristics of sustainability and sustainable development. From a Knowledge Management, we ought to find a way to handle those ideas from an organizational knowledge perspective. In this paper, we point to Responsible Knowledge Management and Spiritual Knowledge Management as two concepts that address relatedness and futureness, and thus answer the call for sustainability and its inevitable role in Knowledge Management.

## 3. Responsible Knowledge Management

The existential challenges (e.g., climate change, social inequalities), that are on the sustainable development agenda, require wise answers. However, instrumental-calculative rationality and rational knowledge reach their limits in the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) situations we are facing (Rocha et al., 2022; Kerschbaum, 2022). Using current examples, Durst (2021) illustrates these shortcomings and calls for a new approach to knowledge management, i.e., Responsible Knowledge Management.

For this endeavour, Kragulj (2023) and Rocha et al. (2022) stress the importance of practical wisdom (phronesis). Phronesis dates back to Aristotle and can be defined as "the capacity to put into action the most appropriate behaviour, taking into account what is known (knowledge) and what does the most good (ethical and societal considerations)" (Rowley, 2006, p. 1250). Phronesis is knowledge that enables one to act towards the common good. Emphasising this direction in corporate activity recognizes the relatedness of business with society and

the natural environment, and leads to acting responsibly toward humans and other entities. After comprehensively reviewing the literature, Kragulj (2023, p. 214) characterises a practically wise person as someone who can adopt and act from six perspectives: "subjective-situative", "holistic", "temporal", "communal", and "integrative"; he thereby extends the work of Nonaka & Takeuchi (2011) on the "practically wise leader". More specifically, the "future-oriented perspective" includes both the capability to "prepare for the future" and "shape the future" by "think[ing] and act[ing] future-oriented", "adopt[ing] a broader and long-term perspective", "act[ing] for the good of the community", and "balanc[ing] conflicting interests" (Kragulj, 2023, p. 214f). Responsible Knowledge Management needs to cultivate and foster these perspectives in a way that they serve the organisation as a strategic resource.

Kerschbaum (2022), building on Kragulj, (2022) argues along the same line of reasoning and emphasizes the role of aesthetics as an additional source of knowledge to account for sustainable corporate strategies. Aesthetics in that regard describes a sort of knowledge that is highly subjective and experiential and allows for individuals to 'feel' the aforementioned issues of sustainability in a VUCA environment. As opposed to rational knowledge from instrumental-calculative reasoning, aesthetics recognizes sensorial perceptions and their felt meaning as an important source of knowledge for organizations (Taylor and Hansen, 2005).

# 4. Spiritual Knowledge Management

Spirituality can be considered as "a belief or value system which permeates all of a person's life, giving life meaning in the context of six basic human relationships: 1) to God, or whomever or whatever is considered ultimate reality, 2) to self, 3) to others, 4) to the environment, 5) to the past, and 6) to the future" (Hoshiko, 1994 cited in Westera, 2016, p. 6); it is the being related to something self-transcendental. Consequently, spiritual knowledge is "about the deep human concerns of our existence, and of our connection with the whole universe" (Bratianu, 2015, p. 72). In this context, the concept of "self" as an analytic tool allows for introspection and reflection on our relationship between ourselves and 'others' (Dyson et al., 1997).

Spiritual Knowledge Management can be characterized as the process of creating, capturing, distributing, and effectively using knowledge to achieve the future best version of myself as a person or the future best version of itself as an organization (Kaiser, 2023). The basic idea of this approach is the fact that a fundamental dimension and key element of spirituality, which can be found in almost all definitions and approaches of spirituality - even if they are sometimes quite different - is the self. Spirituality is connected inseparably with a continuous evolution of the self towards a fully developed and fully unfolded self. The concept of Spiritual Knowledge Management takes this into account and argues that a stepwise development takes place, which can be seen as a transformation from the current version of the self to the future best version of the self. Since the future best version of the self is not (completely) known at the beginning of this path, this process can be thought of as a process of becoming (Clegg et al., 2005) and at the same time as a deep learning process (Kaiser, 2023). During this learning process, knowledge about the very nature and shape of the future best version of the self is created, and at the same time, this knowledge shapes and clarifies not only the future best version of the self, but also the way to achieve it (Kaiser, 2023). Moreover, Spiritual Knowledge Management is informed by and results in self-transcending knowledge that allows us to act on the "relation and interaction with world and with something that is other than it-/oneself" and expands our "boundaries (of the self) and [provides a] bigger picture", including "purpose, meaning and final cause" (Kaiser & Peschl, 2020, p. 534). For its generation, methods such as "learning from the future as it emerges" (Scharmer, 2009) and "learning from an envisioned future" (Kaiser et al., 2016; Kragulj, 2014) may be used. As such, Spiritual KM bridges a gap between the individual and an organisation in a sense that it addresses personal values and beliefs which are embedded in an organisation. Thereby the study of spiritual knowledge facilitates the conscious evocation of meaning in an organisational context.

The following figure-1 shows schematically the approach of Spiritual KM as an entire system.

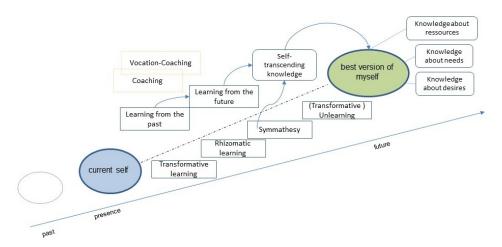


Figure-1: Spiritual Knowledge Management as an Entire System

In the following there are a few comments and remarks on this model:

- Figure 1 shows the evolution process from the current self towards the best version of oneself schematically and in a highly simplified way, since in practice it is very unlikely to be a straightforward process.
- In order to give some structure and direction to the deep learning process from the current self toward a future self, it is important to consider what specifically needs to be learned. Various authors (Kelly, 2004), (Maureder, 2004), (Kelly, 2017), (Kaiser, 2017) argue that the fulfilled self, i.e., the best version of oneself, is defined or characterized by (at least) three dimensions, namely legitimate needs, wants and desires, as well as talents, strengths, and resources. If this holds true, then we need to create knowledge about these three dimensions knowledge about needs, knowledge about deep wishes and desires, and knowledge about resources and strengths as part of the deep learning process.
- During this learning process, knowledge about the very nature and shape of the best version of the self is created, and at the same time, this knowledge shapes and clarifies not only the best version of the self, but also the way to achieve it (Kaiser, 2023). Following Nonaka and other scholars, knowledge can be defined as the capacity to act (Stehr, 2012), (Sveiby, 1997), (Sveiby, 2001). Accordingly, it is precisely the knowledge generated in this deep learning process that enables a person to act step by step on the way to becoming the best version of oneself. Consequently, without creating this knowledge, a person would get stuck on his or her path and would not be able to develop and grow (Kaiser, 2023). The same holds true for organizations and companies.
- To enable and support this deep learning process respectively and to bring this process in action, we assume that the methods mentioned in figure-1 (Coaching, Vocation-coaching, transformative learning, rhizomatic learning, symmathesy, (transformative) unlearning, as well as learning from the future and learning from the past, could be helpful. Whether this is really the case will be part and content of future research and investigations.

In terms of relatedness and futureness, numerous links can be identified. The core idea of the Spiritual Knowlegde Management approach is about becoming. Who you become is more important than what you are doing or what you have right now. This radical future orientation is of course not an end in itself, rather it is intended that the so-called future best version of oneself, corresponds to the principles of sustainability and wisdom better and to a higher degree. Finally, this development towards the future should have a significant benefit for all stakeholders, i.e. not only for the person him/herself, or for the company or the organization itself, but also for the (social) systems in which the person or the organization operates. It is precisely because of this that the aspect of relatedness also comes into play to a great extent. Therefore, it could be argued that spiritual knowledge management can be considered as an approach to do "the right things," which is considered one of the most important characteristics of sustainability.

## 5. Synthesis

What both of the presented lines of research have in common, is that they bring back the emphasize on personal experience and tacit knowledge respectively. Tacit knowledge is, indeed, a concept that has been around in Knowledge Management for decades. It has even been a substantial foundation for a large part of the field that builds on Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) influential theory of knowledge creation in a company. Yet it seems that the meaning of the original idea of tacit knowledge, which was formulated by Michael Polanyi in 1966 (Polanyi and Sen, 2009), had been lost out of sight in the last years. Research in the fields of both Responsible Knowledge Management as well as in Spiritual Knowledge Management hence again emphasize the value of tacit knowledge (although from different angles) in order to address todays challenges in sustainability. It has been argued that rational knowledge alone will be an insufficient means to deal with contemporary problems, because those problems are too complex to be understood as a whole by using instrumental-calculative reasoning. Instead, these problems require practical wisdom on an individual (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2011) but also on an organizational level (Kragulj, 2022). In its totality, they can only be perceived aesthetically and require individuals and organizations to understand themselves more as 'part of' instead of an 'entity in' the world. This necessarily implies a change in the perception of the individual and organizational self. Individuals and organizations must hence develop and understanding of who they are and what their place in the world is. That process can be understood as a quest for the best version of one's self and requires numerous sources of non-rational knowledge and direct experience (Kaiser and Peschl, 2020). We argue that only through recognizing the importance of, and cultivating such kind of tacit knowledge - be it wisdom, aesthetic meaning, spirituality, or else – it becomes possible to achieve true relatedness that will result in long-term oriented decision making, best described as a mindset of futureness.

For all those aspects, we see a strong connection to the field of Knowledge Management that builds on knowledge (and in that regards, knowledge must means all types of knowledge) as a source of competitive advantage (Grant, 1996; Spender, 1996). However, to be coherent, and in the light of current challenges, we shall probably reconsider the idea of *competitive* advantage towards a more conjoint notion of advantage and value-generation for society. This is, because the achievement of true sustainability will require us to move the boundaries from an individual organizational advantages-perspective to a more systemic-societal perspective of value generation. However, this is not to say that organizations will only, or should only operate towards big and noble societal goals. Rather, organizations operating on the basis of principles relatedness and futureness, will still pursue their individual purpose, yet this purpose is likely to be far more grounded in the overall system, hence leading to more and better value creation for society as a whole.

What the discipline of Knowledge Management can bring to the table in this regard is (a) great expertise and insight on individual and organizational knowledge and how to deal with such knowledge in the context of organizations, but also (b) theories and studies about the application, generation and sharing of knowledge (both tacit and explicit). What is more, Knowledge Management could (c) serve as an interface between organizational practice (daily business) and sustainable strategic planning, if it is concerned with collecting and interpreting insight about the value that an organizations seeks to create in world.

# 6. Avenues for Further Research

The fields of responsible Knowledge Management and Spiritual Knowledge Management are still in their infancy. Thus there are plenty of open ends that would make up for promising ends for further research. In the following, we will give some ideas where this research could go.

First, there could be more in-depth studies on the nature of tacit knowledge and its relationship to knowledge on sustainability, spiritual knowledge, wisdom, or aesthetics and how they can be cultivated and applied in organizational settings. Also, it would be worthwhile exploring, what individual skills are required to apply such forms of tacit knowledge, and also, how people can acquire such knowledge or skills. What are, for example, the implications for the education of business leaders and other decision-makers in organizations?

Second, research could examine how organizations can shift their focus from individual organizational advantages (the classical competitive advantage) to a more systemic-societal perspective of value generation. This could involve exploring how organizations can identify their purpose within the broader system, and how they can measure and communicate their impact on society.

Third, research could focus on the role of conventional Knowledge Management (e.g. KM Systems) in promoting sustainability. This could include investigating how Knowledge Management Systems can be used to capture,

share, and apply knowledge on sustainability, as well as how it can be used to support strategic planning and decision-making against the backdrop of relatedness and futureness.

Overall, there is a need for more research that integrates different disciplines and perspectives, including Knowledge Management, sustainability, wisdom, spirituality and other disciplines that are concerned with notions of non-rational knowledge, in order to address the complex challenges that organizations and society are facing these days.

### 7. Conclusion

Sustainability has become an essential objective that companies must meet to ensure a better future for all. The shift in focus from managing a stock of knowledge to providing a management tool that enables doing the right things has brought about a need to rethink the role of Knowledge Management. We have argued that sustainability is particularly characterized through notions of relatedness and futureness. Those are important, because they create an interface between Knowledge Management and Sustainability. On the other hand, in the field of Knowledge Management there are already some initiatives towards sustainability, namely Responsible Knowledge Management and Spiritual Knowledge Management that fit well to the ideas of relatedness and futureness and embed them in the area of Knowledge Management. A key finding in this regard is that in order to address sustainability, Knowledge Management ought to focus on non-rational forms of knowledge and tacit knowledge as a valuable counterpart to instrumental-calculative rationality.

Further research should hence address the relationship between non-rational or tacit knowledge and sustainability, spiritual knowledge and wisdom. Additionally, further research should also target individual capabilities necessary to generate or apply non-rational knowledge.

Lastly, if we adopt a mindset of futureness and relatedness as part of Knowledge Management or Knowledge-based Management respectively, we can reconsider what we understand by competitive advantage on the basis of knowledge. Our image of competitive advantage could then undergo a transformation towards a more conjoint, multidimensional notion of advantage for an organization but also value-generation for society and future generations as a whole, instead of the one dimensional advantage over competition.

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