Knowledge Management During Organizational Crisis: The Influence of Leadership

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Abstract: This qualitative case study investigates how leadership influences knowledge management (KM) and organizational learning (OL) within a Swedish manufacturing organization facing economic pressure. In an increasingly volatile environment, maintaining knowledge continuity is essential for being competitive and organizational resilient. Data were collected through 27 semi-structured interviews with 31 participants and then analyzed using thematic analysis. The study shows the importance of leadership styles and the leadership's ability to understand the organization from a holistic perspective as well as the digital maturity of the company. The results reveal a significant loss of knowledge resulting from downsizing in order to manage economic pressure, specifically regarding critical tacit knowledge described as "fingertip feeling". This personal, intuitive expertise is vital for navigating production variables and maintaining an old machine park that relies on specialized in-house competence. This means that even if workforce downsizing may be effective in the short-term for managing economic pressure, in the long-term it likely results in critical (tacit) knowledge loss and hence have a negative impact on effectiveness and competitiveness. The study finds that an authoritarian, top-down leadership style acts as a primary barrier to a healthy knowledge culture. Furthermore, it revealed that a lack of transparency regarding major leaderships decisions fosters a culture of silence. The study also revealed a digitalization maturity gap where leadership-driven tools are viewed as administrative burdens due to low digital maturity and a preference for analog methods suited to situated practice. Organizational learning is further hindered because employee improvement initiatives often run out in the sand due to a lack of systematic follow-up and structured feedback loops. The study confirms that leadership is the primary driver for building a culture of continuous learning. To maintain competitiveness and resilience during crises, leadership needs to adopt a holistic perspective that values tacit knowledge and organizational learning. Failing to integrate KM and OL into daily work processes directly compromises long-term organizational memory and the ability to adapt to adverse events.

Keywords: Leadership, Knowledge management, Organizational learning, Digital maturity, Tacit knowledge

1. Introduction

In a fast-changing world, organizations must have the ability to meet demands of both their internal and external environment (Yeo, 2005), to be competitive. Economic pressures often result in downsizing, restructuring, and increased managerial control. This may improve short-term financial performance, but today when the most valuable asset is knowledge (Marchegiani, 2021), organizations need to be aware that employee turnover results in an organization's inability to ensure continuity of knowledge and hence will have a negative effect on their competitiveness (Hana & Lucie, 2011). It will also have a negative impact on organizational resilience since organizational learning and organizational resilience are inherently interrelated (Evenseth et al, 2020).

Organizational resilience is about an organization's ability to anticipate potential threats, to cope effectively with adverse events, and to adapt to changing conditions (Duchek, 2019, p.220), i.e. to be a learning organization (LO). Evenseth et al (2020) argue that learning is connected to all three stages of resilience (anticipation, coping, and adaptation) that organizations need to develop. Organizations must learn how to learn and how to manage their knowledge resources, i.e. performing knowledge management (KM) (Aggestam, 2006a; Aggestam, 2006b). KM is about ensuring that knowledge from previous experiences can be utilised and applied in decision-making and organisational development (Jennex et al., 2007; Jennex, 2005).

Leadership is responsible for KM and has a crucial influence on the organizational culture, communication patterns, and the level of trust between employees and management. These factors are critical for creating an environment that supports knowledge sharing and collaboration (e.g. Lei, et al., 2019). Leadership styles

characterized by transparency, participation, and support for learning encourage employees to share knowledge and to contribute to continuous improvement (Jiang & Lou, 2018). In contrast, highly centralized and authoritarian leadership styles may discourage open communication and reduce employee engagement (Busse & Regenberg, 2019).

Despite extensive research on KM and organizational learning, relatively limited attention has been given to how leadership influences KM in organizations experiencing economic crisis (Buhagiar & Anand, 2023). Understanding this relationship is particularly important in manufacturing environments where tacit knowledge, as for example as "fingertip feeling", plays a critical role in maintaining production quality and operational performance. Research has increasingly emphasized the importance of leadership for knowledge management processes and organizational learning within organizations (Pellegrini, et al., (2020). Leadership is often seen as a key factor in creating conditions that support knowledge creation, sharing, and the development of learning practices. However, as noted by Pellegrini et al. (2020), the relationship between leadership and knowledge-related processes remains fragmented and requires further investigation in different organizational contexts. In particular, there is a need for a deeper understanding of how leadership shapes knowledge management and learning processes in organizations experiencing structural and economic pressures.

The purpose of this study is therefore to explore how leadership influences KM and organizational learning within a manufacturing company facing economic pressure. The study contributes to filling the knowledge gap concerning how leadership, in a manufacturing organization experiencing economic pressure, influences KM processes and practices, knowledge sharing, and organizational learning.

2. Theoretical Background

Being a learning organization (LO) positively affects work engagement and employee resilience (Malik & Grag, 2020). To build a culture of continuous learning within organizations, leadership is the key (Ahsan, 2025). There is also a strong relationship between LO and knowledge management (KM) and the process to become, or be, a LO must include KM (Aggestam, 2006a, Aggestam, 2006b). Figure 1 gives a conceptual description of LO and KM.

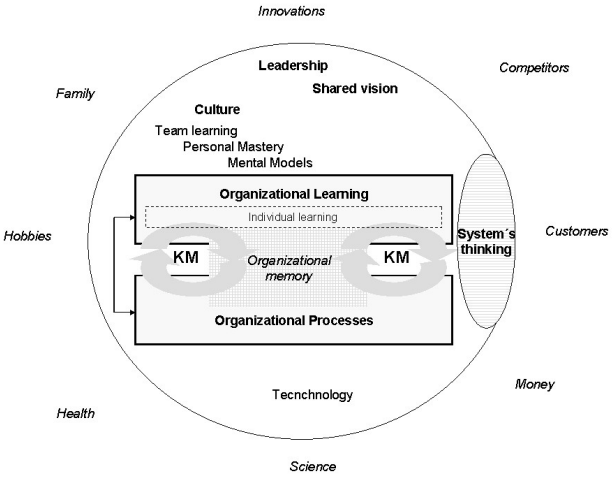

Figure 1: A conceptual model of LO and KM (Aggestam, 2006a)

2.1 Learning Organizations and Leadership

A learning organization (LO) is one that facilitates the learning of all the individuals in the organization (Pedler et al, 1989) and "continually expanding its capacity to create its future." (Senge, 1990, p. 14). A LO considers the needs of the individuals in it (Kline and Saunders, 1993) and has a culture that supports learning and innovations, both by individuals and by the organization itself (Wiig, 1993). Leadership has a key role in creating and shaping the culture (Krapfl & Kruja, 2015; Schein, 2004; Bertassini et al, 2021; Ashan, 2024).

In the beginning, the founders form the culture, and as long as the organization is successful this culture defines the leadership, but if the organization has problems and difficulties, the leadership must do something

(Schein, 2004), see Figure 2. It takes time to foster a new (learning) culture. Culture as a concept is abstract, but its consequences in, for example, behaviors are concrete (Schein, 2004).

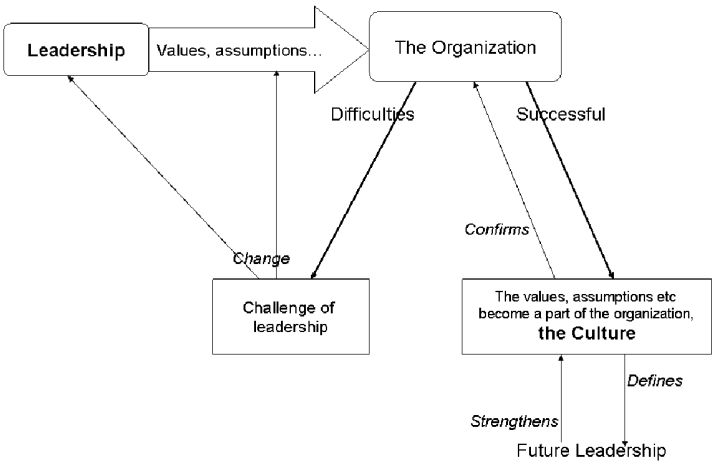

Figure 2: Leadership and culture (Based on Schein, 2004)

Leadership and a learning culture are also important for employee well-being. By fostering a learning culture, organizations can enhance employee engagement, creativity, innovation and adapt more effectively to a changing environment (Ahsan, 2024).

2.2 Learning Organizations (LO) and Knowledge Management (KM)

LO and KM are dependent on each other, and KM can be regarded as a subsystem of LO; changes in KM result in changes in the organization and vice versa (Aggestam, 2006a). A LO must facilitate communication and knowledge sharing, both within and across organizations and stakeholders (Evenseth et al, 2022). KM aims to create value by learning from past experiences and not repeat mistakes. It is about ensuring that the right knowledge is available for the right person at the right time, so that knowledge and previous experiences can be applied in decision-making and organizational development (Jennex et al., 2007; Jennex, 2005). This includes knowledge sharing, i.e. managing knowledge so that knowledge relevant to the organization can be easily captured, packaged, shared, and used. To be successful, there must be a knowledge sharing attitude (Call, 2005; Chua and Lam, 2005; Sun and Scot, 2005; Busch and Richards, 2004). Furthermore, while the management has the responsibility for the strategic level, all the members of the organization are responsible for the daily KM work.

There are different types of knowledge and different ways of describing and categorizing these (e.g. Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Wiig, 1993; Svensson & Durst, 2021; Wang & Jacobson, 2023). A common distinction in the literature is between tacit and explicit knowledge (e.g. Gore & Gore 1999; Loermans, 1993; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Wiig, 1993). Tacit knowledge is difficult to identify and to express since it is highly personal and concerns insights and intuition (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995; Blodgood & Salisbury, 2001). Explicit knowledge is easier to express and can, in contrast to tacit knowledge, also be processed by a computer (Blodgood & Salisbury 2001; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Different types of knowledge have different implications for KM work (e.g., Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Knowledge develops from information (Wiig, 1993) and also has a function of contributing to new information (Schreiber et al., 2000). Activities aimed at creating knowledge occur within individuals or through interaction between people. (Davenport & Prusak, 1998), but the real transformation process, when information is transformed into knowledge, is individual. Learning is situated in practice (Mehrizi et al.,2022; Nicolini et al., 2003). This means that professional knowledge changes as practice develops and learning occurs through the change in practice (Hopwood, 2016).

There is also a difference between organizational knowledge and individual knowledge, where organizational knowledge is knowledge that remains in the organization even if an employee leave (Aggestam et al., 2010). Figure 3 visualizes KM and its different parts. Effective knowledge sharing with support from digital technology requires culture and work processes that enable both to contribute and to find the knowledge and information needed. For the knowledge to be used it must contribute to benefit, be of high quality and be relevant (Cheuk

et al., 2017; Sharma & Bock, 2005). Therefore, it is critical that a culture and working methods are established that ensure that knowledge is kept up to date and up to date over time (Aggestam et al., 2010). Leadership, as well as champions, have a key role in creating culture, structures and incentives for knowledge to become a strategic resource and to build a learning culture.

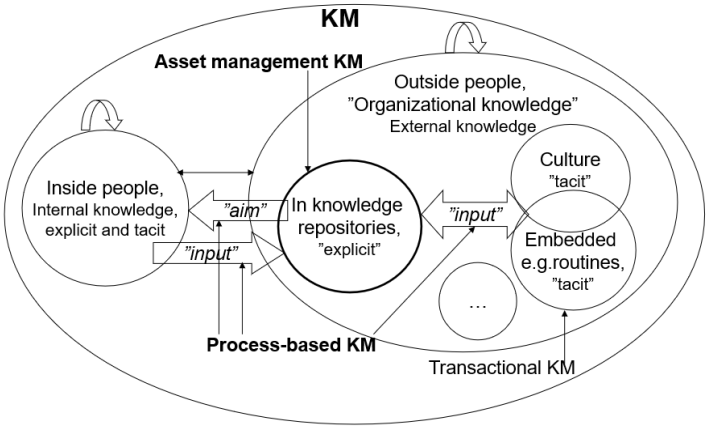

Figure 3: KM and its different parts (adapted from Aggestam et al, 2010)

3. Method and Analysis

3.1 Study Design

This study was conducted as a qualitative case study (Myers & Avison, 2002). The study is conducted in a Swedish family-owned manufacturing company experiencing economic pressure and workforce downsizing. A single case study can be justified if it is purposeful and provides a large amount of information (Gummesson, 2001). The company produces prefabricated concrete elements and related products used in building and infrastructure projects. Its operations combine industrial manufacturing with practical expertise to deliver durable building solutions for both private and public clients. The company has traditionally been characterized by an authoritarian leadership style. This has shaped how decisions are made, how responsibilities are distributed, and how employees relate to management, and is therefore still an important contextual factor for the company culture. A case study approach was considered appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of complex processes, such as the interplay between leadership, knowledge management, and organizational learning, within their real-life organizational context.

The research design was guided by the principle of capturing multiple perspectives across the company. By involving nearly all employees in the study, the design enabled a comprehensive understanding, including different perspectives, of how leadership influences knowledge management and learning processes throughout the company. The study also incorporated iterative interactions with participants, including dialogue meetings on preliminary findings (Grundén, et al., 2020), to ensure that interpretations accurately reflected participants' experiences. This design provides a rich, contextually grounded data set that supports an in-depth analysis, while enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

3.2 Data Collection

The research process began with an introductory phase in which the study was discussed with the company's management. Two further initial meetings were held with the CEO to set up the study and discuss the purpose of the study, clarify the organizational context, and establish access to participants within the company.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Silverman, 2017). In total, 27 interviews were conducted involving 31 participants from different parts of the company. Nearly all employees participated; only two were unable to take part due to absence at the time of the interviews. This high level of participation allowed the study to capture perspectives from across the company. Each interview lasted approximately 45–50 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

After the initial analysis had been conducted, the preliminary findings were presented to the interview participants in a dialogue meeting (Grundén, et al 2020), where also the management participated. This session allowed participants to reflect on the interpretations, clarify statements, and contribute additional perspectives. Comments and reflections from this session were documented and incorporated into the

ongoing analysis. The findings were subsequently presented to the organization's management as part of the feedback process.

3.3 Analysis Method

The empirical material was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed an iterative process in which the interview transcripts were read repeatedly to gain familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated and subsequently grouped into broader themes. From this analysis central aspects of leadership, knowledge management, and organizational learning were captured and grouped into themes focusing on how leadership influences KM and organizational learning within the manufacturing company facing economic pressure. Throughout the analysis, attention was paid to identifying recurring patterns while also considering variations in perspectives among participants.

4. Results

Based on the empirical data collected and the analysis conducted, the following themes outline how leadership influences KM and organizational learning within a manufacturing organization facing economic

4.1 Leadership Styles: Impact on Trust, Knowledge Sharing, and Professional Culture

The historically authoritarian and top-down leadership style prevents effective knowledge sharing and a sense of connection among employees. A critical lack of transparency is evident, where decisions are made without explaining the underlying "why," leaving employees feeling excluded from the company's broader direction. Furthermore, for the intention to have open discussion is perceived by many employees as a manipulation rather than a genuine invitation for feedback. This perception fosters a culture of silence where workers stop offering insights to managers because they believe their input cannot influence actual outcomes.

Knowledge sharing within the company is strongly influenced by workload and managerial priorities. During less-pressured periods, employees are granted a relatively high degree of autonomy in organizing their own work, creating opportunities for informal learning. During periods of high work pressure, opportunities for knowledge sharing are limited, as employees must prioritize immediate production tasks over collaborative learning. As a result, knowledge exchange tends to be deprioritized in everyday practice. In addition, management does not appear to emphasize the importance of knowledge sharing, partly because employees are viewed as largely interchangeable. This perspective reduces the need to invest in the development and dissemination of individual or collective expertise.

This leadership style has damaged the organization's social ties and reduced professional pride among employees. Employees who previously felt a sense of ownership, citing examples like being proud of a specific wall they created, now report a shift toward indifference and stress following layoff notices. The "us and them" mentality is not only geographic, between different factory sites, but also functional, where a lack of communication between sales and production prevents the transfer of vital knowledge across organizational boundaries. Furthermore, management's focus on short-term cost control has led to increased physical strain, with reports of employees being expected to perform heavy lifting alone, tasks that safely require two people, due to reduced staffing levels.

4.2 The Erosion of Tacit Knowledge and "Fingertip Feeling"

A significant finding in this study is the gap between how management views the work and how complex the production process actually is. Employees report that mastering the manufacturing of precast concrete requires a specific "fingertip feeling", a deep form of tacit knowledge built over many years. This expertise involves navigating subtle variables such as different types of stone, fluctuating weather conditions, and precise temperatures. The study indicates that management underestimates the time and experience required to build this competence, often seeing employees as replaceable instead of recognizing their specialized knowledge. This perception is further reflected in organizational responses to economic downturns, where employees may be temporarily laid off, reinforcing the notion that individual knowledge and experience are not considered critical organizational assets.

This knowledge loss is critically exacerbated by the physical context of the factory, which relies on an old machine park, with some equipment dating back to the 1970s. Maintaining and troubleshooting these old machines requires highly specialized in-house competence that is not easily documented or transferred. As workforce downsizing is initiated to respond to economic pressure, the company loses the veteran staff who possess the tacit knowledge required to keep these machines running. Consequently, the layoffs create a state

of high vulnerability; newer staff face a steep learning curve and are often left without the mentorship or support needed to perform complex repairs, leading to extensive production downtime when old machines inevitably fail.

4.3 Barriers to Organizational Learning: Ideas "Running Out in the Sand"

The most significant barrier to OL is the lack of a structured process for transforming individual insights into organizational action. Employees frequently take the initiative to suggest improvements, but these ideas often "run out in the sand" because management fails to provide action plans or consistent follow-up. While deviations are recorded, they rarely result in actual changes to work methods, giving staff the feeling that their work does not matter.

The old machinery and the economic pressure serve as the ultimate bottleneck for improvement initiatives. Many employee suggestions require major interventions or investments that a reductionistic leadership, focused purely on cost-cutting, is unwilling to make. This lack of structure for capturing and implementing ideas kills motivation. If employees feel that even their most practical suggestions regarding the machines they operate daily are ignored, they eventually stop contributing to the KM process altogether. The study confirms that the historically rooted authoritarian leadership style, which fails to understand the holistic need for structured feedback and the integration of learning into daily work, actively compromises the company's long-term knowledge capital.

4.4 The Digitalization Gap and the "Maturity Trap"

There is a profound contrast between management's modernization strategy and the company's actual operational and KM maturity. While leadership pushes for digital tools like Teams and other digital tools, the workforce often lacks the technical proficiency to utilize them effectively, having trouble with basic things like logins and passwords. This indicates a low level of KM maturity, where digital tools are viewed as administrative burdens rather than integrated components of daily learning.

The limitations of the physical environment further widen this gap. In an old and spatially constrained factory where machines from the 1970s dominate the production landscape, employees often find digital interfaces cumbersome and instead prefer analogue methods, such as physical whiteboards for improvement suggestions. The digital strategy appears disconnected from the situated practice of the workers; for many, the constant stress of managing technical failures and repairs and service on aging machines makes digital adoption a secondary priority. Successful KM requires that technology, culture, and physical work processes interact seamlessly, but the current leadership fails to integrate these digital tools into the actual workflow of the production staff.

5. Discussion

Our study confirms that leadership is critical to build a culture of continuous learning (Ahsan, 2025; Bertassini et al., 2021) and fostering the connection between KM and OL (Aggestam, 2006a; Evenseth et al., 2022). It is evident that leadership shapes communication and collaboration, and that an authoritarian, top-down leadership style that lack transparency can undermine the trust needed for knowledge sharing (Busse & Regenberg, 2019). It is critical that leaders value knowledge and competence in practice, specifically through performing KM and encouraging a learning culture, as failing to do so directly compromises organizational sustainability (Hana & Lucie, 2011). This is particularly vital in manufacturing firms where old machine parks make tacit knowledge indispensable for effective production, highlighting the clear necessity for a holistic leadership understanding.

A key finding is that leadership often overlooks employees' personal, intuitive expertise, the "fingertip knowledge" (Mohanty, et al., 2024), and treats them as replaceable, which prevents the organization from fully using their skills. This creates strategic risks as downsizing and turnover prevent knowledge continuity (Hana & Lucie, 2011). Losing experienced staff means the organization also loses valuable knowledge. This study shows that a historically authoritarian leadership style is risking deterring a healthy knowledge culture. A lack of transparency regarding the "why" behind decisions causes employees to view open discussion as manipulation. Three levels of inquiry (why, what, how) as described by Van Gigch (1991) is an important part of a holistic perspective. While centralized leadership discourages engagement (Busse & Regenberg, 2019). When leadership is centralized, employees are less engaged and trust in management is decreasing (Figueiredo et al., 2025). This leadership style shapes social connections and fosters an "us and them" mindset, which hinders knowledge sharing across departments (Evenseth et al., 2022).

There is also a profound contrast between digitalization strategies and actual digital maturity. Leadership must understand this maturity to move beyond administrative burdens Effective KM requires that technology, culture, and processes interact seamlessly. In this study it is shown that analog methods often better suit the "situated practice" of workers, when digital adoption is deprioritized (Mehrizi et al., 2022). Since professional knowledge and learning develop through practice changes (Hopwood, 2016), failing to integrate tools into production workflows misses critical opportunities to support KM.

The study indicates that a significant barrier to organizational learning is that individual insights and tacit knowledge are not effectively used across the organization. In the studied company, employee initiatives frequently "run out in the sand" because management fails to provide action plans or consistent follow-up. Ultimately, organizational resilience is tied to learning, specifically the ability to anticipate, cope with, and adapt to adverse events (Duchek, 2020). A leadership that lacks a holistic understanding of how cost-cutting measures compromise long-term knowledge capital will struggle to maintain resilience in an increasingly complex and volatile environment. This study also adds knowledge to developing of organizational resilience, since there is a clear relation between learning and resilience (Malik & Grag, 2020; Evenseth et al., 2020).

6. Conclusions

The study revealed the importance of style of leadership and their capability of having a holistic perspective. To understand that workforce downsizing as a method to solve economic problems may be effective in the short-term, but in the long-term it likely results in critical (tacit) knowledge loss and hence has a negative impact on effectiveness and competitiveness which in turn lead to further economic problems. This is even worse in a company as our case with old machines that require highly specialized in-house competence that is not easily documented or transferred. It also highlights the importance of digitalization and the necessity for management to understand the digital maturity in the company whether digitalization should support KM and learning, and not the other way around.

This study has several limitations worth noting. As a single-case study of one Swedish manufacturing company, the findings cannot be straightforwardly generalized to other organizational or cultural contexts. Additionally, the largely tacit and situated nature of "fingertip feeling" makes it inherently difficult to fully capture through interviews alone, thus observational methods might have provided additional depth. Furthermore, the study captures knowledge management dynamics at a specific moment of economic pressure, meaning that how the situation develops over time falls outside the scope of the study.

Ethics Declaration: No formal ethical approval was required for this study, as it did not involve sensitive personal data. Nevertheless, the research was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants were provided with information about the study and its purpose, and informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Participants were also assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

AI Declaration: AI-assisted tools were used to improve grammar and readability and to support preliminary data analysis. Interpretation and conclusions remain the responsibility of the authors.

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