
7 Power and Knowledge

Learning objectives

- Explore power, politics and conflict in event organisations and their impact upon knowledge management.
- Learn to identify 'expert power' and 'legitimate power' within organisations and understand how they relate to knowledge management.
- Define power as a positive resource for knowledge to be created and shared, and explore opportunities for 'empowerment' within organisations.
- Understand the concept of power/knowledge and apply it to event organisations.

Introduction

This chapter discusses the links between knowledge and power and aims to demonstrate that, to “manage knowledge implies use of power, in terms of the ability of an organisation to achieve a collective sense of ‘what to do next’ and to exercise authority over the behaviour and communication patterns of internal and external agents – thereby influencing such things as who will interact with whom, on what basis, and to what purpose” (Clegg & Ray, 2003: 23). Power, knowledge, and the ‘rules of the game’ within an organisation (its political system, organisational culture, how things are done) are therefore intertwined; one cannot simply exist without the other. Clegg and Ray (2003: 23) go on to say, “the interaction of power and rules – to enable and constrain legitimate individual and collective actions – simultaneously shapes those actions. Rules shape actions that, in turn, have consequences for the evolution of rules and their interpretation in context.”

It is important to note that based on the distinction between the objectivist and practice-based understanding of knowledge management used in this book, the question of power has also been dealt with rather differently in academic literature. Under the former, questions of power, politics and conflict are largely ignored. Power (as well as knowledge, for that matter) is simply regarded as something possessed by somebody 'over' someone else. It is a zero-sum game, where the saying 'knowledge is power' completely dominates the field. This can be based on, for example, power through hierarchical organisational structures, authority, as well as power through knowledge hoarding, and has been discussed by many scholars (see for example, Dixon, 1999; Willett, 2000; Pervaiz et al., 2001; Liebowitz, 2008). The first part of this chapter will explore the concept of power in this sense further. It will be clear to see that there is a lot of research on stakeholder power in events, but not much on power and knowledge, or power and knowledge management more specifically.

More recently, and in line with the practice-based understanding of power, it has been argued that power can also be regarded as a positive resource, in the sense that power and power relations can 'produce' new knowledge when people interact with each other and create a shared meaning (Gordon & Grant, 2005; Heisig, 2014; Heizman & Olsson, 2015; Stadler, 2019). The work of Foucault (1977, 1980, 1982) is crucial to discuss here, especially his concept of power/knowledge which shows that the two are inseparable. Nicolini (2007, 2011) further suggests that because knowledge practices are always collaborative in nature, inequalities are constantly produced and reproduced, which in turn leads to questions around power and conflict. "Power can [therefore] be seen as 'the rules of the game', which both enable and constrain action" (Clarke & Jepson, 2011: 9). This will be the subject for the latter sections in this chapter, where emphasis is put on how power and power / knowledge could be both a positive and a negative resource in event organisations, depending on how they are practised during the different stages of the event life cycle. If managed well, opportunities to 'empower' staff members, volunteers, and other stakeholders can arise and shape a very positive way forward when engaging in various knowledge practices.

Power, politics and conflict in organisations

Power, politics and conflict can, of course, arise in any organisation, even in the most egalitarian types of organisations, as well as between the organisation and other external partners or stakeholders. Organisations are, after all, political systems, where individuals, groups, teams, or departments constantly compete with each other for resources, such as money or space. A range of political tactics (for example, power games) can be played here to gain access to these resources. At the same time, it might occasionally be beneficial for individual employees to simply ‘play the (political) game’, in order to not create any conflict or dispute. In other words, politics within an organisation does not necessarily have to be a negative thing, it can also be constructive in leading change and innovation (Buchanan & Badham, 2020). In an events context, Larson and Wikström (2001), for instance, found that managing by consensus usually leads to stability, through for example, mutual commitment and trust; whereas conflict within the organisation highlights tensions, or power games between actors, which can – in a positive sense – create innovation and change. It is therefore important to acknowledge both, consensus and conflict, to coexist within organisations and in any relational interaction between co-workers, who in turn employ strategies for using one or the other at different times and for different purposes – sometimes intentionally, at other times unintentionally. In relation to knowledge management, it is therefore important to know and understand the political system, the rules of the game, and people’s roles within this, in order to effectively engage in knowledge practices with others, rather than using power and politics in a destructive, anti-social way, or to play dirty tricks.

Surveillance is another example of how politics and power can play out in an organisation. Clegg (1989: 191) maintained that surveillance can occur in a personal, technical, bureaucratic or legal sense. “Its types may range through forms of, for instance, supervision, routinization, formalization, mechanization and legislation, which seek to effect increasing control of employees’ behaviour, dispositions and embodiment, precisely because they are organization members.” But it is important to understand that surveillance is not necessarily just about direct control. It could also be about cultural practices and norms, moral questions within the organisation, or formalised technical