

# The Role of Knowledge Leaders in Creating a Knowledge-Based Organizational Culture Conducive to Knowledge Sharing: A Theoretical Framework

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**Abstract:** Globalized technological and cultural advances changed organizational environments significantly. In order to stay competitive, organizations need to acknowledge the value of their knowledge assets and the necessity to become knowledge organizations to transform and adapt to these changes through knowledge management. Although there are many studies on knowledge sharing, few have examined the role of knowledge leaders and the combined effect they have on the culture of the organization. The commonality of most recent research indicates an emphasised focus on the knowledge management of information creation and sharing to create a knowledge-based organizational culture conducive to knowledge sharing. This emphasizes the role of and need for knowledge leaders for positive intervention to enhance knowledge sharing for problem solving and innovation through efforts to develop a culture of trust and commitment. Where knowledge management focuses on two main theoretical perspectives, namely human capital and knowledge-based theory, the leadership theories emphasise that leaders should acknowledge the premises of the strategic intent of the organization through the management of information, creative media strategies and environmental scanning based on trust, loyalty, integrity and credibility. Hence, it is argued that the role of knowledge leaders in knowledge management is a combination of continuous enquiry on the systems and processes of an organization and how the functioning of the organization can be improved through proactively and interactively managing the intellectual capital (individual and collective knowledge) under its leadership. The need for further research on these concepts provided impetus for the research problem that there is a lack of existing studies investigating the role of knowledge leaders in creating a knowledge-based organizational culture.

**Keywords:** Knowledge management; knowledge sharing; knowledge leaders; knowledge-based organizations; organizational culture.

## 1 Introduction

“A fruitful way of further research would be determining proper instruments based on the formulated strategies which could serve as a guideline for organizing an iterative process of navigation through the complex and dynamic system of knowledge sharing within organizations, in particular the development of effective communication instruments for managing knowledge sharing” (Block and Khvatova 2013:59).

Although organizational knowledge has been recognized as a valuable intangible resource that holds the key to competitive advantage, little progress has been made in understanding how knowledge sharing at individual level could benefit knowledge use at collective level to ensure added value. Furthermore, although leaders paid attention to the learning organization initiative, it has not been implemented in organizations and this has created the realization that knowledge management should be applied to the entire organization at all levels so as to ensure that learning takes place through knowledge creation, codification, storing and sharing. In seeking to address this gap, this study sets out with two main objectives: to critically review existing

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literature through an exploratory interpretivistic approach; and to propose a theoretical framework. According to Bryman and Bell (2016), interpretivism as research methodology stems from an epistemological position and refers to the critical application of analyses of various academic traditions in order to study the social world. The paper is structured as follows: key constructs, leadership, the changing organizational sphere, knowledge-based organizational culture, the role of knowledge leaders and knowledge management in the organization, theoretical framework and conclusion.

## 2 Key Constructs

The following key constructs are prevalent in this paper.

### 2.1 Knowledge

The degree of individual knowledge is personal and based on the individual's willingness to acquire and/or share that knowledge, a process which is difficult to manage. Individual sense making refers to the relationship between the signifier (norm) and the signified (sense) and the meaning created. This means that individuals should participate in the knowledge creation and sharing process in such a way that they interpret the world as their own understanding and in order to ensure that meaning is created to others. Knowledge can be tacit (individually owned, which is difficult to set out in tangible form), explicit (knowledge set out in tangible form at team or organizational level), implicit (information or knowledge not set out in tangible form) or cultural (sharing of knowledge through socialization or capturing it in digital form) (Koenig 2012; Choo 2002; Nonaka 1994). The process of knowledge creation and sharing articulates into innovation, which needs the exploitation and exploration of knowledge. Hence, knowledge is valued experience, skills and understanding through expert insights and contextual information that provides a framework to measure new information – such as documents and reports – available within the organization to achieve mutual benefits. The value of the explicit form of knowledge is dependent on various dimensions such as context, usefulness and interpretation, all of which support a dichotomous view that knowledge must exist before information can be formulated and before data can be measured to form information (Freeze and Kulkarni, 2005). According to Rechberg and Syed (2014), the meaning of the word “knowledge” has been debated since 430 BC in the doctrines of Plato and since 550 BC in the lessons of Confucius. Through these teachings, we have learned that knowledge is a justified true belief (also defined as such by Nonaka 1994) and a theory or explanation, as well as an idea or form perceived by an individual. Aristotle drew a distinction between “knowing what” and “knowing how” in the fact that knowledge can be attained through an individual's personal experience or by taking note of someone else's experience, making individuals both the vehicle and source of knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995). Although this classical view of knowledge is still valuable today, the modern view on knowledge is associated with competitiveness, power, knowledge as a form of asset, and participation by individuals to generate and share knowledge, as well as their consent concerning how to manage knowledge to add the organizational value inherent in the knowledge management process.

### 2.2 Knowledge Management

According to Oluikpe (2012), knowledge management (KM) has generated interest at management levels due to its capability to deliver strategic results to organizations and thereby to enhance profitability, competitiveness and capacity. For the purposes of this study, the following definition of KM is proposed (adapted from Nonaka, 1994; Bounfour, 2003; Scarborough *et al*, 1999; Zack, 1999; Sunassee and Sewry, 2002; Singh and Kant, 2008; Barker, 2016): KM refers to any process or system of creating, acquiring, capturing, sharing and using knowledge to enhance innovation and organizational performance where the KM strategy is aligned with the overall organizational strategy of the organization's knowledge resources, capabilities and intellectual requirements through infrastructures, knowledge leaders, reward systems and innovative ideas.

The management of organizational knowledge is seen as a strategic means for organizations to improve their performance, become innovative and sustain a competitive advantage (Davenport and Prusak, 1998, Wang and Noe 2010; Bollinger and Smith, 2001; Lofti, Muktar, Ologbo and Chiemeke, 2016). The role of KM and its processes has therefore become vital to creating a knowledge-based organizational culture to achieve competitive advantages (Nonako, 1991, 1994; Nonako and Takeuchi, 1995) where organizational culture

consists of collective thinking and teamwork to enhance organizational performance (Barker 2018).

### 2.3 Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge sharing is the most crucial process of KM (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000) and is defined as the process through which explicit or tacit knowledge is communicated to other individuals to enhance organizational innovativeness and performance (Becerra-Fernandez and Sabherwal, 2010). Hence, it involves effective transfer where the recipient(s) acquire and understand the shared knowledge in such a manner that action can be taken through the utilization of knowledge without the recipient(s) necessarily internalizing the shared knowledge. According to Wu and Zhu (2012), there is no all-round definition of knowledge sharing. Hence, for the purposes of this paper the following definition has been developed (Friesl, Sackmann and Kremser, 2011; Barker 2016): Knowledge sharing is a process in which one unit is affected by the knowledge and expertise of another unit through formal collaboration or in informal interaction. This process depends on the value of the source's knowledge, the willingness of the source to share knowledge, willingness of recipient(s) to receive and acquire knowledge and the absorptive capacity of the recipient(s) to create new knowledge in support of organization strategies.

In brief, it refers to the willingness of employees in an organization to share the knowledge they have acquired or created with their colleagues on individual or team level to enhance skills and understanding.

## 3 Leader Ship

Research indicates that the new leadership movement validates the idea that simple views of the universal validity of characteristics, behaviours or styles are not suitable for explaining the dynamics of the leadership process. To date, no leadership theory or model has been presented to provide a comprehensive and all-inclusive explanation of leadership. Many studies reflect only one philosophical viewpoint or are based on limited, even biased research, explaining limited aspects of leadership and operating as self-fulfilling prophecies (Gill, 2011). Leadership research also seems to lack the cumulative theory building that occurs in other social sciences. Probably, the main limitation is the fact that opinions on leadership are fragmented and based on the different trajectories in isolation, specifically the cognitive, behavioural, emotional, moral and spiritual aspects of human existence and the need for the creation of meaning (Gill, 2011). Goffee and Jones (2006), who argued that the traditional understanding of leadership was primarily concerned with providing meaning, also pointed this out. Furthermore, Glynn and DeJordy (2010) found that understanding how leadership infuses meaning, values and purpose is an underdeveloped and potentially fruitful area of leadership research.

Based on shortcomings of existing approaches to leadership, and since it has been argued that emerging knowledge organizations are associated with adaptive approaches, the most prominent leadership theory used in the literature is usually the transformational approach. Transformational leadership emerged in the 1980s and was first defined by Burns (1978:20) as a process in which “leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of morality and motivation”, where the process of transformation is based on empathy, understanding, insight and consideration; not manipulation, power or coercion. Notwithstanding the negative connotation of power in this sense, note should be taken that Foucault (1982) said in *Les Anormaux* (referring to the standardization process conducted during the twentieth century), that the rule carries a claim to power and that its role is not to exclude or refuse but, on the contrary, it is always linked to a positive technique of intervention and transformation. It is also important to remember that for Foucault (1982), power relations are deeply rooted in the social nexus; but a society without power relations can only be an abstraction. According to Donate and De Pablo (2015), a distinctive type of leadership behaviour – knowledge-orientated leadership – is used for knowledge management initiatives and attracts the most universal acceptance in knowledge management literature.

Based on existing literature (inter alia Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Singh 2008; Donate and de Pablo 2015; and Oliveira 2018), as well as additional viewpoints of the researcher, the main leadership styles are summarized in Table 1 to indicate the importance of a knowledge leadership perspective.

**Table1:** Main leadership styles.

Leadership styles	Key thrusts
Traditional leaders (trait, servant, leader-member exchange, behavioral, contingency, etc.)	<p>Rationality and control to maintain organizational goals, resources, structures and people (individual independent agents).</p> <p>No specific description of leadership behaviours to create high quality relationships.</p> <p>Abstract definitions.</p> <p>No processes to address environmental changes, cultural differences, interpretation of information and strategic decision making.</p>
New leaders (charismatic, transactional, constructionist, transformational, spiritual, pragmatic, visionary, etc.)	<p>Leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of morality and motivation.</p> <p>Emphasize values such as loyalty, equality, etc.</p> <p>Focus on empathy, understanding, insight and consideration; not manipulation, power or coercion, but motivate and empower followers (although power can also be used as a positive intervention in transformation).</p> <p>Four important skills: self-awareness, self-management, social involvement and relationship management.</p> <p>Leader/followers are interdependent.</p> <p>The role of the context is emphasized.</p> <p>Interpersonal leadership is a system with leadership, organizational and environmental aspects.</p> <p>There are rich, interdependent connections between the organization and its leader/follower members.</p> <p>Leaders should balance authenticity and adaptation in the context</p>
Knowledge leaders (also referred to as knowledge-orientated leaders in some literature)	<p>Combine aspects of transformative and transactional leadership styles.</p> <p>Act as role models and change agents by encouraging learning stimulate them intellectually, institutionalize learning through the provision of incentives and training, foster a pro-learning culture through cross-functional and cross-discipline engagement.</p> <p>Intensify explorative initiatives by seeking to create new knowledge.</p> <p>Encourage the willingness for exploitation practices to retain assets which aim to leverage existing knowledge through storage, transfer, sharing and application.</p> <p>Have a direct effect on the application of knowledge through knowledge sharing based on strategic integrated communication and the strategic intent of the organization.</p> <p>Provide strategic visions, motivate others, communicate effectively, model good practices and carry out the knowledge agenda through interdependent relationships.</p>

	<p>Religiously explain the goals of knowledge management to all concerned through interaction, vision, creativity, innovation and empowerment to create meaning.</p> <p>Take a participatory stance, offering interaction, trust and loyalty.</p> <p>Leader/follower roles are interchangeable with focus on productivity.</p> <p>Collaborative interpersonal relationships are central.</p> <p>Organizational culture conducive to transparency, empowerment and a team focus.</p>
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Knowledge leadership comprises envisioning the future, coordinating the development of a coherent mission and overseeing the development, control, processes and strategic intent of the organization to provide integrated strategies, relationship building, organizational performance, a positive organizational culture and climate (Sanghani 2009), the use of intellectual capital, especially during change, to ensure competitiveness. Singh and Kant (2008:6) emphasized the need for knowledge leadership which should be evident throughout the organization and operate on all hierarchical levels from top to bottom, and that the role of knowledge leaders is to “provide strategic visions, motivate others, effectively communicate, act as a change agent, coach other around, model good practices and carry out the knowledge agenda ... knowledge leaders should religiously explain the goals of knowledge management to all concerned”. Because knowledge management was presented as the theoretical foundation for this study, specifically the importance and role of change agents or experts (enablers) that can manage all information at all levels (individual, team and organizational), the term “knowledge leaders” has been adopted. Denrell (2005) came to the conclusion that, during the change process, (knowledge) leaders should conform to the following: empower individuals (like employees) to respond creatively; adopt personal and active attitudes towards individual and organizational goals to contribute to resonant leadership practices; be self and socially aware (and therefore be able to recognize, understand and react empathetically to their own and others’ emotions and goals); be equipped with skills such as self and relationship management (which are characterized by transparency, adaptability, collaboration and inspiration); should be associated with a supportive organizational climate due to a constructive organizational culture; have, in the change process, the role of inspiring people. This is in contrast to the traditional approaches that focus mainly on rationality and control to maintain organizational goals, resources, structures and the people involved with these.

#### 4 Changing Organizational Sphere

In terms of change management, the traditional approaches such as the action research model (systematic analysis of change), the three-step change model (unfreezing moving and refreezing), and the phases of planned change approach (organizational development which focuses on processes and participation), have been criticized by authors such as Overman (1996) and Jaatinen (2002) in that they are too rigid, their phases or steps are not chronologically ordered because of changes in the environment, incremental and isolated changes are addressed rather than radical transformation, they over rely on a management approach to reduce conflict, create order, control chaos and simplify the complexities in the turbulent environment and that they will not work in all organizations. Furthermore, these authors have argued that the underlying viewpoint is that information is power which needs to be controlled, hence the need for structures. According to Oliveira (2018), organizational change may occur during complex processes such as mergers, successions, acquisitions and the like, which means that leaders should focus on the obstacles to the organization culture. Based on these viewpoints, it is argued that although these approaches were effective for many decades, the introduction of new technology, overload systems, better-informed employees and worldwide access to modernistic approaches meant that conflict or crisis usually resulted from poor planning and control. In the new leadership movement approaches – such as the chaos theory (which touched on the participatory nature of change management), complexity theory (rooted in the systems theory) and the contingency approach (role of external environment to develop congruence) – the

focus shifted to dynamic environments moving away from planned change and organizational development to the management of change and transformation at a strategic organizational level. This supports the underlying purpose of this paper, which sets out to emphasize the need for knowledge-based and strategic integrated communication with the emphasis on true and interactive participation and a holistic perspective where all systems and subsystems are integrated to create shared ownership and commitment (Barker 2016). Jaatinen (2002) made convincing arguments as to the importance of interdependence, participation and relationship building in terms of new approaches to change management. Hence, it is posited that the process of the system becomes important where all the subsystems should participate in adding to the richness of information, knowledge creation, codification and storing, shared responsibility, trust, transparency, connectivity, creativity and relationship building. This argument is supported by authors such as Grunig and Hung (2000) who indicated the importance of the concepts of control mutuality, joint acceptance of degrees of symmetry, trust and satisfaction with the relationship to communication management and relationship building. Today most organizations tend to follow a combination of the planned and emergent approaches to change management, usually based on their specific strategic goals and objectives.

## 5 Knowledge-Based Organizational Culture

A knowledge-based organizational view proposes that knowledge is the strategically important resource of the organization. To build a knowledge culture in a dynamic organization, it is argued that knowledge-based organizations should transform, develop and nurture systems and processes to ensure knowledge creation, storing, codification and sharing in a meaningful way so as to expand individual knowledge (implicit) to collective organizational knowledge (explicit). This explicit knowledge can then be interpreted and applied, or used to ensure that learning is created to clarify and adapt the strategic vision of the organization during change. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) also refer to embodied, tacit and narrative knowledge and the “absent presence” of the body as an essential part of everyday communication because it allows for the creation and sharing of knowledge (Barker 2016).

In spite of the growing interest in knowledge management, it has been critiqued by researchers such as Andreeva and Kianto (2012) for being too optimistic and promising more than it can deliver – and also because it is difficult to manage knowledge. However, Massingham (2014) addressed these concerns in an empirical study using action research from a critical systems perspective and provided empirical evidence that knowledge management can be used to manage knowledge resources (strategic integrated communication, human, monetary and information-based) and that it can be used to create a knowledge-based organizational culture. He did, however, agree that it is difficult to implement. The challenge for knowledge leaders is to develop an organizational culture conducive to the sharing of knowledge and where learning becomes the norm. While it is realized that such a culture might be a little problematic to implement, it is argued that it could encourage and support a range of positive outcomes in the dynamic changing environment and transformations of organizations. However, research has yet to reveal whether it would indeed be implementable because research-based evidence is needed to provide the expected outcomes. In spite of this, the importance of this viewpoint is re-emphasized by the growing interest in knowledge management which has, according to Oluikpe (2015, 351), “moved the topic from a relatively new discipline to an important strategic source for competitiveness”.

## 6 The Role of Knowledge Leaders and Knowledge Management in the Organization

According to Koenig (2012), the domain of “knowledge management” seems to continue its growth and attract new researchers on a continuous basis. For the purposes of this paper, the main researchers in the field, namely Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), Davenport and Prusak (1998), Nonaka (2008), Argyris and Schon (1978) provided the context and background theories on knowledge management. The main thrust, according to them, is that knowledge management is about organizations and problems related to learning, information management and innovation, which are classical themes in most organizational studies. Hence it is argued that knowledge management is a combination of continuous enquiry on the systems and processes of an organization as well as how the functioning of the organization can be improved through proactively and interactively managing the intellectual capital under its leadership. According to Ra’ed, Gharaibeh, Tarhini and Obeidat (2015:2) this discovering of new knowledge is defined as “the development of new tacit or explicit knowledge from data and information or from the synthesis of prior knowledge .... and capturing of knowledge is defined

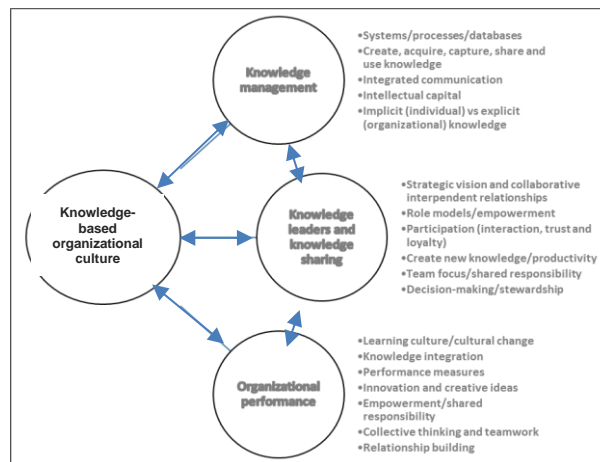
as the process of retrieving either explicit or tacit knowledge that resides within people, artifacts of organizational entities and knowledge reside outside the organizational boundaries...”. Tacit knowledge is the skills and expertise (“know-how”) within individuals, while explicit knowledge is that which can easily be captured in documents or databases. According to Al-Alawi, Al-Marzooqi and Mohammed (2007), the process of KM involves several activities, with the most commonly discussed being knowledge sharing. Hence, studies that are more recent acknowledge the need for further research to identify the precursors that could enhance the occurrence of knowledge sharing (Mishra and Bhaskar 2011) and to study the impact of knowledge sharing on organizational performance (Mills and Smith 2012). The need for knowledge management and the importance of knowledge leaders are therefore driven by the following factors: organizational survival, competitive differentiation, globalization affects and aging workforce.

The findings in a study by Crawford (2005:14) provided evidence of a “growing interest in the relationship between the “high touch” nature of leadership and the “high tech” aspect of the workplace ... and demonstrated the link between person-centered transformational leadership and some technical construct, in this case knowledge management”. This is emphasized by Oluikpe (2015) who posited that the importance of knowledge management in the organization should include both the capabilities to enable the capture and leverage of intellectual capital and the deployment of this capital to the advantage of the organization. According to Mårtensson (2000), the term “intellectual capital” is the preferred umbrella term because it refers to the possession of knowledge, applied experience, stakeholder relationships and professional skills which link to strategy. Based on the conceptual roots of intellectual capital identified by Edvinsson, Roos, Roos and Dragonettel (1997), the strategic contributions of knowledge are based on the way in which knowledge is created or developed as well as the way it is leveraged into value. In spite of this realization, knowledge creation and development is mostly examined from the learning organization perspective; whereas it is argued that, in order to create this value, there should also be a focus on “knowledge sharing” to enhance the value and, ultimately, to give an organization a sustainable competitive advantage. One major issue that has hardly been dealt with is the integration of knowledge from both perspectives where the focus shifts from individual perspectives to an emphasis on knowledge residing within the organization as a whole.

For the purposes of this study, intellectual capital is linked to strategic integrated communication; human and monetary sources needed for the processes and structures *in* the organization; and knowledge-based resources which include the management of leadership styles, technology, stakeholder relationships, innovation, creativity, participation, strategic intent and corporate culture *of* the organization. The importance of knowledge leaders in creativity, innovation, participation and organizational culture are, according to Chase (1998), the heart of creating successful knowledge-based organizations.

### 7 Theoretical Framework

Based on the above discussion, the author constructed a new theoretical framework, as presented in Figure 1.



**Fig. 1:** Theoretical framework for knowledge-based organizational culture conducive to knowledge sharing by knowledge leaders.

From Figure 2 it may be deduced that knowledge management allows for organizational strategies based on *structural* elements including intellectual capital, systems, processes and knowledge codification and storing in databases (technical component), *connectivity* through strategic integrated communication which is knowledge-information-meaning-based communication component) and focused on *behavioral* aspects to ensure relationship building, which should be culture-based to obtain trust, satisfaction, transparency and engagement by all (human/organizational component). It is argued that if tacit knowledge is made explicit, individual knowledge can be transferred, shared and used at all organizational levels. Due to the difficulty of transferring tacit and individually owned knowledge to explicit and organizational knowledge, the major contribution is that if knowledge leaders as change agents apply knowledge management, it will lead to greater possibilities to manage and control this knowledge effectively, especially during change and transformation. From a strategic perspective, knowledge management is firstly about the acquisition of information, secondly about the codification and storage of this information and of the knowledge in various databases which can be used for datamining, thirdly to make the information available and accessible to all hierarchical levels in the organization and, lastly, the fact that this information should be *shared and used* through sharing, socializing, externalization and exchange of information.

Hence, it is posited that by using knowledge management, knowledge leaders can be used as role models to empower others because knowledge management can be described either as an operational tool or as a strategic tool. In order to do this, participation becomes a key element to ensure the three components of knowledge management (technical, communication and human/organizational) are implemented through connectivity, structural and behavioral constructs. This will lead to creativity and innovation, which are key elements for emerging knowledge-based organizations. It is further argued that if knowledge management is implemented in the organization during change and transformation, knowledge leaders will emerge as change agents or role models with the necessary skills to enhance decision-making, shared responsibility, relationship management and stewardship at all levels of the organization (from individual to organizational levels). This emphasizes the need for knowledge leaders to have a sound understanding of people, processes, systems, strategic visions and similar within the organization. In order to do so, these knowledge leaders should rely on integrated communication to fulfil the roles of both collaborator and catalyst. Hence, it is argued that, if these change agents or knowledge leaders respond to changes in the outside systems and borderless aggregates during transformation, knowledge-based organizations could be created. These knowledge-based organizations will then create a learning culture in line with the strategic vision through integration of both implicit and explicit knowledge. Reward systems and performance measures will become important to ensure that motivation takes place to empower people through the knowledge application or use, which will ultimately lead to cultural change. Lastly, it is argued that, in the long-term, this process will enhance the value of knowledge organizations, specifically in terms of their culture, knowledge creation and sharing to the benefit of all.

## 8 Conclusions

In bringing together the ideas and interrelationships of the key concepts that have been discussed, this paper attempts to contribute to the theorization of the link between knowledge management, knowledge leaders, knowledge sharing and knowledge-based organizational culture. While it is argued that the paper can be seen as useful for understanding knowledge-based organizations on a macro level, it is also important to keep in mind that knowledge itself is not directly accessible; rather it is accessed through individuals that hold knowledge at a micro level (Nonaka and Nishiguchi 2000).

Hence, the focus on individual human knowledge is emphasized and should be considered by knowledge leaders through a participative approach, innovation, creative ideas, and the sharing and use of this knowledge in support of the organizational culture. Hence, the concept of “knowledge leaders” does indeed make business sense in that it can contribute to explaining how the management of knowledge is linked or related to the leadership of the organization. The need for the development of the new theoretical framework in this study, as well as its relevance, are probably best described by Gold and Arvind Malhotra (2016:186) in the following statement: “... the issues of effective knowledge management from the perspective of organizational capabilities suggests that a knowledge infrastructure consisting of technology, structure and culture along with knowledge process architecture of acquisition, conversion, application and protection are essential organizational



capabilities of ‘preconditions’ for effective knowledge management”.

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