

Knowledge withholding

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Valorization Addendum

Once there were coffee specialists from Starbucks committed to developing an instant coffee that would adhere to the high standards of their company. Every day, they worked diligently to perfect the product they coined as VIA, an abbreviation of ValencIA. They had to iterate secretly because many Starbucks coffee shop owners regarded instant coffee as an inferior product that did not fit into their core values. But at some point, VIA was perfect. The CEO of Starbucks, Howard Schultz, was convinced that VIA would perform. However, he had to find a way to overcome the bias among the store owners and launch the high-quality instant coffee that his specialists developed. He decided that the best way to do this was to keep the knowledge about VIA for himself and invite some of his coffee-shop owners to taste “new brewed coffees.” While the owners were sipping coffee and discussing flavors, none of them imagined that they were drinking instant beverages. Until finally, Mr. Schultz revealed that these were actually the new instant coffees of Starbucks. This led to an immediate acceptance among the store owners, that have stayed with them ever since. Mr. Schultz repeated these private tastings repeatedly to increase support for the product within his company. After garnering enough support for the coffee, Mr. Schultz decided to launch VIA into the market, after which it became a very successful product of Starbucks (Schultz & Gordon, 2011).

What the CEO of Starbucks actually did is that he withheld knowledge from his store owners to achieve his goal, which was to overcome their prejudice about instant coffees and let them experience the high quality that it could have. In other words, he wanted to convince them that instant coffee could be tasteful and enjoyable. Just like the CEO of Starbucks, many other leaders in different types of organizations also have the responsibility to decide on how much knowledge they withhold at what moment in time to achieve their goal. A challenge with such considerations is that they may be taken intuitively and based on earlier experiences rather than on rationales provided by scientific research. Looking at the potential consequences of an inadequate withholding of knowledge, the study of the reasons for this behavior is of utmost societal importance.

Scientific Relevance

Not only in the world of coffee, knowledge-withholding behavior is used to reach goals. Our studies, including a literature review across different settings and two qualitative studies in the military context, revealed numerous reasons to

withhold knowledge. With these three studies, we aim to fill in the gaps we observed at our project's start. As such, we noticed that extant research tended to approach the phenomenon from the angle of knowledge sharing, which gave the subject a negative connotation. In this line, knowledge-withholding behavior was often studied in competitive settings in which one of the actors had to achieve their goal at the cost of the other. Also, the extant research yielded numerous antecedents that were individually explained by various theories, but they painted a picture of scattered explanations over the theoretical landscape.

Given the scatteredness of former research results on antecedents of knowledge withholding, we aimed to develop an integrated framework supporting researchers and practitioners to understand in a comprehensive way why people withhold knowledge. Moreover, instead of narrowing our studies to competitive situations in which individuals withhold knowledge within an organization, we studied this behavior individually and in groups, in competitive and collaborative cases, and within and between organizations. Due to the fact that we regarded this behavior as a phenomenon between humans, we took the standpoint that it occurred in a relationship, and, as such, we constructed the framework using the relational theories of interdependence, social identity, and social exchange.

The main findings of our research are that people with competitive goals tend to increase their knowledge withholding or hoarding towards each other, especially in situations where people experience strong social identities (intergroup conflict) or have a power difference between them. In more detail, the research illustrated that a weaker party tends to withhold or hoard knowledge from a stronger party. The data also showed that people with collective goals tend to decrease their knowledge withholding or hoarding. Note that this may not be the case in a few particular circumstances. Moreover, despite that people may have collaborative goals, people seem to increase their knowledge withholding or hoarding when the behavior may benefit their social group with which they have a strong connection, when they assess the costs of knowledge (leakage) as high, or when they are in a teaching role. Despite these clearly bordered categories, people may also experience competitive and collaborative goals with various other people at the same time. The data showed that people in these circumstances might increase or decrease knowledge withholding or hoarding, depending on the strength of connection or trust they may experience with the involved people.

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings of our studies and the developed framework of antecedents of knowledge-withholding behavior, we provide persons holding important knowledge in organizations with a deeper understanding of reasons for determining whether to decide for transparency and sharing the knowledge they have at that moment or to decide to withhold knowledge as they perceive it as beneficial rather than harmful. Throughout this dissertation, we focussed on the practical implications of our research on those people who are in leadership positions. They have the formal power to influence their people and, to some extent, their surroundings in such a way that they consciously consider and decide to act or not in knowledge-withholding situations.

Looking at the practical relevance from a broader scope, this leadership category might include not only frontline leaders but also people in leadership positions that may be slightly more distant from people. For example, this might consist of people who work in a human resources department because they tend to support leaders in their daily work. Or this category may also include executives and policymakers who decide on processes, procedures, and policies that directly affect how people behave. Knowing why people conduct in knowledge-withholding behavior might help them integrate this into their advice towards leaders or craft policies that incorporate the factors that influence this behavior.

Dissemination of the findings

The findings of this dissertation may be disseminated in various ways. The first channel through which the results could be offered to a broader audience is education. Academic programs in, for example, leadership and business administration tend to focus on the need for organizational transparency or the benefits of knowledge sharing. While the Starbucks example illustrates the practical usage of knowledge withholding, the research so far provides a thorough understanding of why people withhold, hoard, or hide knowledge. In this line, academic programs and their students may benefit from raising their awareness of knowledge-withholding behavior and incorporating these insights into their considerations and decisions regarding handling knowledge in relational contexts. Moreover, it is essential for leaders to have an understanding of how goals, social identities, trust, and reciprocity affect the knowledge-withholding behavior of people.

The second channel through which the content may be disseminated is social media, traditional media, or publications. In the case of social media, leaders tend to have a LinkedIn and Twitter account for their professional network and, in some cases, a Facebook or Instagram account for personal purposes. We propose to use the strategy of post-repost-post-repost on these channels. Also, the social media channels of the university and journals may be used to distribute the content to leaders. Next, regarding traditional media, it might be an option to submit a media proposal to online and newspaper publishers. These can be reposted on social media channels when this may lead to a publication. In this line, it might be worth considering submitting these proposals to local cities' newspapers with many students or businesses. Last, concerning publications, we may need to consider submitting papers to journals that are read by various categories of people. This would widen the audience and raise the research's impact. When a paper is published, it can be posted on social media channels and referred to in traditional media postings. All in all, this may positively impact the people in knowledge-withholding situations.

The third channel for research dissemination is the research process itself. For example, in the single-case study, we conducted interviews, participant observations, and studied archival records. At some point in the process, we went back to the respondents to conduct member-check interviews to get a sense of whether our thoughts, rationales, and arguments on the topic resonated with them. Looking back, this is one of the first interactions with potential users of the findings and one of the steps in dissemination to a wider audience. Another way of dissemination through the process itself is that a substantial part of the research is conducted in the United States at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School. The primary researcher conducted a master's program for military leaders at that school and, as such, used the Ph.D. research to contribute to a master's thesis that was necessary for fulfilling the requirements. The thesis process was supervised by a professor for the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School and a professor from Cornell University. This brought attention to this research in other countries, different universities, and other disciplines. Taken together, the multi-disciplinary and multi-nationality of the whole team of Ph.D. and master supervisors not only brought fruitful and insightful collaborations but also a way to increase exposure to a broader audience.

Conclusion

The research presented in this dissertation has been conducted comprehensively to understand why people withhold knowledge, broadening the settings for research from individualistic to team settings, from competitive to collaborative environments, and from within to between organizations. This has resulted in new insights that leaders or persons who hold knowledge for other actors can use to make well-informed decisions on whether or not to withhold knowledge. By conducting our studies in interaction with leaders and collaboration with teachers in an international leadership program, the first steps in valorizing our findings have been taken. The following steps in valorization can be taken by disseminating our research results among persons in leadership positions and those responsible for leadership programs.

References

Schultz, H., & Gordon, J. (2011). *Onward: How Starbucks Fought for Its Life without Losing Its Soul*. New York, NY: Rodale, Inc.