

Knowledge Management

Danone's knowledge management provided the organizational mechanisms for solving problems and sharing know-how. According to Benedikt Benenati, former Director of Communication and Development, the key feature of Danone's knowledge management system was its simplicity. In preference to formal knowledge sharing devices such as databases and PowerPoint presentations, Danone encapsulated ideas and experiences in pictures, videos, and stories. Communication mechanisms included peer-to-peer problem resolution in which a manager with a problem became a "taker," a manager with a possible solution a "giver," and exchange was mediated by a "facilitator." Once a problem was resolved it became a "nice story." For broad-based sets of problems where a wider exchange of know-how was needed, Danone established a "Market Place." The first of these was for R & D managers. To brief participants to Market Place sessions, Danone produces a "Little Book of Practices" in which "good" (not necessarily "best") practices were listed. The various devices used to simplify knowledge sharing, includes "Message in a Bottle," in which a participant is allowed just two minutes to outline a problem and request assistance, and where knowledge can be physically shared.

Because of Danone's geographical spread, most knowledge sharing and problem solving must occur through virtual mechanisms using the group's intranet. Here the key tool is Danone's "Who's Who" directory that allows each manager to identify colleagues with relevant expertise.⁸

Danone's informal system of knowledge management was viewed by Mr. Riboud as entirely consistent with its management system: it allowed a high level of decentralization of initiatives and problem solving and used lateral rather than vertical communication. Also, the process lent itself to be applied within the different local contexts according to the different working cultures and attitudes. It has been likened to a neural system in which Danone's individual subsidiaries were linked with regional knowledge hubs located in Paris, Barcelona, Amsterdam, Moscow, New York, Buenos Aires, Shanghai, and Singapore, and these hubs are linked with one another. The system allowed adaptability to local conditions, a multiplicity of stimuli, and a linking of stimuli to responses in the form of actions.⁹

As a central strategic thrust for the whole company, research and development played a key role in linking the Danone global network in its mission to "bring health through food to as many people as possible." Danone Research employed 1,200 technical personnel in 15 different countries developing expertise in:

- microbiology, yogurt starters, and probiotics
- clinical research and epidemiology
- human nutrition and physiology
- immunology
- neurosciences
- metabolic programming
- water sciences
- food design, food preservation, and packaging.