

Foreword by Donita Volkwijn

I first met John Hovell in August 2017 when I took a Certified Knowledge Manager Course that he was teaching. The course itself was wonderful, but it was the fact that John was teaching it that changed my life, and I am thrilled that John is documenting some of his knowledge, so that other lives can be changed as well.

As John and I emailed back and forth about what should be in this foreword, he gave me a prompt and then wrote, “Like any good knowledge cafe, you’re welcome to throw away that prompt and write whatever you think is needed, wherever your heart takes you.”

If you know John, and after you read his book and glimpse a bit of his special brand of magic, I hope you will understand exactly how much of a John statement that was. I read the subtext as, “I have some thoughts and knowledge to guide you, so use them if you’d like, but even if you go in a different direction, I will be delighted to find where our paths cross, because I trust that they will.”

One of my favorite knowledge management (KM) precepts, attributed to Robert Boyce, is, “Knowledge is power. Knowledge shared is power multiplied.” Implicit in that statement is that in order to share our knowledge, we have to trust what is shared. But we’re also taught not to believe everything we hear and in today’s climate, when knowledge is constantly under attack, it’s more important than ever to be vigilant with the truth. So how do we reconcile the two messages? John bypasses all of that and just builds trust with people. It’s simple and brilliant. If you trust the people, you trust their knowledge.

When I was thinking about how best to honor this book and prepare you for what’s to come, I thought about what I would most want to know before reading a book like this. In working with John and other mentors, I have been struck by how much trauma a workplace can inflict on its staff. We all know and often are the people who are barred from stepping into our full brilliance, because we have yet to experience a workplace that centers equity and delights in the knowledge of its staff.

The reason my world was changed when I took that course in 2017 is because it led to my once again believing that we should all be able to walk into our workspaces, trusting that our knowledge is valued, and our complexities only enhance what we bring to the table. And that together we can bring about the change that allows that vision to be realized.

But sometimes, we’ve been overlooked so often that we start to believe that we don’t matter. Or that we shouldn’t try to dismantle a system that is built to pit us against each other by valuing only certain types of knowledge. Meeting

John ushered me onto a path that brought me into contact with people and ideas that allowed me to believe that the knowledge I hold and essence of who I am are valuable and can only add to the power of the whole.

That pathway is what I'd like to share before you start reading this book. By taking you through some of my challenges and epiphanies, I hope that you can also recognize how John's guidance can help you find your own path to trusting your knowledge and celebrating who you are.

The reason I ended up in that course in the first place is that my company at the time had slowly started to realize that their organizational knowledge, while excellently created, was being squandered by the lack of codified methods to share and search not only internally, but to an ever-increasing external audience.

At the time, I knew a little bit about KM but thought of it only as another way to catalog documents or impose order in an unordered world. The pre-work I needed to do for the class contained a few hints at what was to come and watching snippets from other classes and reading a few articles led me to believe that I knew what I was in for.

Imagine my surprise then, when almost from the beginning, John started challenging our cohort not only to talk about our organizations and how they operated, but to start by looking inward and determining how willing we were to take an honest look at ourselves and the world around us.

As a professionally trained opera singer (a story for another time), I had experienced a lot of "getting to know you" exercises in the past, and while I welcomed them wholeheartedly, I was a tad confused about why they were being used in a class meant to teach us about managing knowledge. Some of the other participants were not only confused, but resistant to the idea: "When are we going to learn about frameworks and AI and how to make our organizations more efficient?"

But I was excited. When I started my undergraduate studies at Oberlin College and Conservatory, there were a lot of entrance tests that we had to take to find out in which music theory, history, and ear training class we were to be placed. Having learned how to sing primarily by ear and not really able to read music, I was placed in the lowest possible rung for all of them. I remember being so envious of the pianists especially, because unlike me, they were simply learning the names of what they had been doing for most of their lives. The chords they played, the pieces they had learned – they finally knew what to call them and how to organize that knowledge in relationship to where they put their hands on the keys.

Over the five days that I took John's course, I felt like I was finally learning the names of the things I had been doing all my life. I remember thinking on the way back to New York, "I might actually have a career." It couldn't have come

at a better time, as I had been feeling adrift as I began to reckon with no longer being able to support myself solely as an opera singer.

I missed the stage. What I thought I was missing was the feeling of standing in front of an audience in my beautiful costumes in hair and makeup that had been created in that moment by artists who had also been honing their craft for decades. I missed the camaraderie, the chills that went up my spine when we were all at our best, singing for an audience that felt something move in their souls. And, truthfully, that was part of it. There's a certain way a theater smells and a special feeling when the lights hit you just right and you're making music that cannot be found anywhere else.

But I digress. As I started to go deeper into KM, I realized what I had been missing was a chance to connect to other human beings in way that changed not only them, but me as well. The more I opened myself to what KM could actually be, the more I realized that the tools of the discipline were also created to connect people and make their lives better.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's go back to the first few weeks after I met John. When I got back to my organization, I was ready to start putting everything that I'd learned into action. I prepared all sorts of presentations and spoke to any number of people and this is when I found out KM rule #1:

Not Everyone is Ready for Change

If you've ever experienced a teacher, a class, or a piece of art that you can point to and say, "this thing changed the course of my life," you'll know what happens when you've had an epiphany and those around you have not. Maybe one part or all of your worldview has undergone a change and you think that everyone else will have experienced the same thing.

What people often fail to consider is how long it takes to prepare for an epiphany. Not unlike the myth of an "overnight sensation," if you haven't prepared for the opportunity, you may not recognize it when it comes along. I had been at my organization for 5 years when I took the KM course, and in those years, I had witnessed and learned and experienced much of what I needed to know to recognize the opportunity that KM presented.

Others in the organization had been taking different paths, so they were not in the same place to recognize what this version of KM could offer to the organization. It was an incredibly humbling and frustrating time. But it also ushered in another KM lesson for me:

One Person Alone cannot Change a System

I'll be honest, I was not prepared to learn this lesson. Until I got into a position in which I could conceivably create system change, I didn't know how much preparation should go into it. It certainly doesn't look easy, but it seems like all it takes is for someone to have great strategy and then everything else falls into place. Wow, was I wrong.

There were definitely people at my organization who could see glimmers of my vision, but the more I tried to do things by myself, the more I failed. At this point, John started coming back into my life with more frequency to drop a little more guidance. Right after I received my certification as a Knowledge Manager (CKM), our group created a Slack channel to support and encourage each other in our post-class strategies. John was always ready to give examples or provide an article or simply talk something through and so was everyone else. That was the crux of it all. By sharing his knowledge, John encouraged us to share ours.

What I discovered in the Slack channel was that I was not alone in my frustration at not being able to implement all that I had learned. I think many of us were so awestruck by finally having tools with which to address some of the biggest and smallest challenges in our organizations that we neglected another important step in creating change:

Find your People

I made the mistake of thinking that my organization WAS my people. Surely, we were all heading toward a common goal, so weren't we all creating a community that brought us all together? I'm not sure what makes me chuckle more, the hubris or the naiveté.

When I took a moment and thought about the different goals of any organization, I started to see where I had gone wrong. While everyone in an organization was ostensibly tied to the mission of the organization, there was no consensus on how to get there. Each program had a different agenda from Information Technology (IT). IT had a different agenda from Human Resources (HR) and Operations had a different agenda from everyone.

By figuring out who my people weren't, I slowly started to figure out who my people were and then strangely, who I was. I had done a few work style assessments and began to put together what my style in the workplace was. Work style assessments can be amazing KM tools. If you use them like a horoscope, "I can't possibly be expected to do that because I'm an ENFJ or because my strength is intellection," not so much. But if they are used to help people

understand how they negotiate the world around them, they are invaluable. They can help identify your people or figure out how to communicate with someone whose strengths are very different from yours.

I discovered, for example, that I was someone who needed to gather information first and then make a plan. I also discovered that was exactly the opposite of how work cultures operate. I had one boss, in fact, who was frustrated with my gathering-information-first approach and said, “I don’t like being in one place too long. I’d rather move in the wrong direction and course correct as I go than feel like I’m not moving forward.”

Neither one of these approaches is inherently wrong or right, nor does it mean that “my people” can only be those who gather information first. In fact, if too many information gatherers convene, it can lead to a lot of navel gazing and analysis paralysis. What matters is figuring out how you operate and then building connections to others who operate differently than you do. As it turns out, my people are those who value and respect that initial slow start but can then move me and my ideas forward.

Half of the KM/Knowledge Services construct is knowing yourself well enough so that you can then look to knowing others, which leads to my next point:

Observe and ask before you change

Looking back at my first few years of KM practice, I was such a mix of earnestness, hubris, impatience, and pluck. In my defense, my intentions were nothing but good. But the impact of my actions sometimes came out differently to my intentions.

As a freshly minted CKM, I was convinced that I had the best way of doing things. And I would venture to guess that a good 75–80% of the time, my way would have been able to stand the test of time. But my approach to convincing others that my way could lead to a better path forward didn’t work for two main reasons: 1) my positional power was not at the level it needed to be to implement the level of change needed; and 2) I didn’t know how to navigate the egos and resistance I encountered.

I don’t mean ego with a negative connotation. We are all beings that want to feel like what we do matters. And regardless of whether a process or system works well, someone put them in place and has some attachment to how they are received. Ironically, it’s often the most inefficient systems and processes that have the strongest champions.

In my opinion, how well a system works is directly related to how much trust has been built in an organization. If, the systems, therefore, are not working well,

it means that there isn't a path for ensuring a trusted process of feedback, which leads to workarounds that have been built to overcome system shortcomings.

These are the kinds of systems that are often referred to as being held together by spit and duct tape. Those are also, of course, the most precarious setups and if you change even one thing in how they operate, you run the risk of the entire thing falling apart.

Which is why you must always observe and ask before implementing change.

We haven't talked much about the people part of the process, so let me take a step back and tell you how John taught me the basics of KM. You'll find that there are variations, but they usually fall into three pillars: people, process, and technology. The three pillars together create your organizational knowledge, and they are sometimes represented as a stool (see Figure 1).

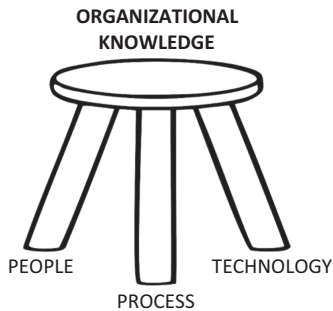


Figure 1: Stool of People, Process, and Technology.

You'll notice that while the pillars are the same size, the people pillar is centered, and that's for good reason. The not-so-secret secret of KM is that you interact with the people first.

Process and technology are important to any organization, but they are agnostic. Process is not going to wake up cranky one morning and decide to snap at technology and cause a bad start to everyone's day. Edward or Tarik, however, might. People are the trickiest and most brilliant part of any system and they must be centered in anything to do with organization development.

Which brings me back to observing and asking before you make any changes. The more inefficient a process, the more it has been adjusted by the people in the organization to fit their needs. If they've been burned before by the promise of "trust me, you'll love it! It's going to make everything so much better!" they will do everything in their power to hold on to the one thing they know works for them. Even if it's redundant, even if it adds an hour to the task, even if it's a legacy from a system that no longer exists.

You can't tell people to trust, you have to show them. And you show them by being transparent in what you're doing and by asking ALL of the questions. Would you tell me how long you've been doing it this way? Were you given context as to how what you're doing fits into the rest of the process? What is it you like about doing things this way? If you could change anything, what would it be?

By asking questions, you a) get people talking and b) show them you care about the work they have been doing and continue to do. Their egos are honored, and their resistance starts to break down. You also learn things you would never have learned if you just observed or never even paused to think that there might be valid reasons to doing something one way rather than another.

About two years after having first met John, I was finally able to bring him onboard as a consultant to my organization, as we were implementing a new Customer Relationship Manager (CRM). I think of this time period as my KM apprenticeship.

You don't always have to do to Learn, but it sure does help

What I valued the most from this time, besides working alongside one of "my people," was simply experiencing John work. Until this point, most of what I had begun to implement was based only on what I had read and some ad hoc guidance from John and others in my ever-expanding KM network.

John, on the other hand, had implemented more KM strategies than either of us could count. I've always prided myself on having pretty decent instincts but asking a senior leadership team to trust those instincts when thousands of dollars are on the line was understandably a hard sell. John, however, could say, with impunity, "In my experience here are the outcomes if you choose this path over the other."

This was also a time that saw some changes to the relationship that John and I had been building. Initially, I thought I would only know him as a brilliant mind who inspired and changed how I made sense of the business world. But having him onsite required us to negotiate a change from teacher/student to colleagues and friends.

I mention this change, because it was part of the growth necessary to begin to trust my own knowledge and experience. I can't remember the first time I proposed an alternate course of action to what John suggested, but I remember thinking, "Wait, I'm going against the wisdom of my mentor. Am I insane?"

It's a testament to the kind of leader John is that he always supported my ideas and flights of fancy. He wouldn't always implement them, but he listened

and would talk through the possibilities. And he understood me. He might have had to ask a few questions to get to the heart of the matter, but I never felt like I was speaking a foreign language.

Even if you Speak the Same Language, you can't always Trust that you're being Understood

It reminded me of a time when I was traveling by train in Europe. I was fortunate enough to have lived in Germany both in high school and in college, so my German was, colloquially at least, pretty fluent.

I had gone to a town an hour or so outside of Paris, and was travelling back home. I have also studied French as part of my training as an opera singer, but it is not what anyone could call functional. Anyway, an announcement was made while we were still in France that I thought sounded like we might be experiencing a delay and I was concerned because I had to make a connection. I went up to the conductor and in my extremely opposite-of-useful French, tried to make my concerns known. Both the conductor and I tried really hard to have the other understand what was being said, but neither of us left the conversation secure in the knowledge that we had actually communicated.

If you've ever had that experience of not knowing if important information has been understood, you also understand how much anxiety it produces. But then, miracle of miracles, we crossed into Germany and the crew changed out. I went up to one of the new conductors and was able to ask, in German, what the situation was. I remember a feeling of relief coursing through me, because I was finally able to understand and make myself understood.

That's what it was like working with John. After years of feeling like I was speaking a foreign language, even though I wasn't "speaking KM" like an expert quite yet, I was at least speaking the same language and felt comfortable that what I said was understood by both of us. It's one of the ways you know you've found your people. You find yourself having to explain your thinking so much less frequently and you can always breathe a little easier.

When you're not always having to explain yourself, your brain relaxes and starts to make other connections. So it was during this time that I also began delving deeper into the issues of racial equity. I started noticing the many similarities between KM and racial equity in that both disciplines were about creating equal access to opportunity and advancement. I also noticed that many organizations thought they were doing it right but were actually creating more trauma for their employees.

Our Identities Shape Our Knowledge

I recall a few pivotal moments that happened as a result of looking at KM and racial equity as two sides of the same coin. The first one that happened with John was when my organization offered me the chance to take on a slightly different role. I asked John's advice and he said, "I've accessed quite a few opportunities by saying yes to everything, but then again, I am a white man."

John has always been upfront about recognizing the privilege that he holds as a white man. It's one of the things I admire about him. He and I had a pretty in-depth conversation around the offer, and I remember saying that while it was hard to acknowledge, that because I was a woman of color, if I took on the position, I would be being set up to fail. He mostly understood what I was saying, but initially I think he still thought it would be a good idea for me to accept.

But then we both started asking questions about how much support I would get if I were to take on the position. It might have been the first time that John saw in real time what it meant to be empowered but not enabled. Everyone said things like, "You're so good at all of this and we think this would be such a great opportunity for you," but no additional funding or personnel were offered. Honestly, I think everyone actually believed what they were saying and were only inadvertently setting me up to fail. I declined the opportunity.

The second moment happened in a group of DEI/OD practitioners (half in the UK, half in the US) to whom John had introduced me. I can't recall the exact time, because sadly, it has happened with such frequency, but yet another unarmed Black man had been shot fatally by the police. Everyone on the call was affected by the situation and the Americans in the group were especially in pain. John suggested that if we could only create conversations by leading with love, we'd find our way out of the grief. Everyone else on the call, who happened to be white, agreed. I countered with not having it in me to lead with love.

Let me back up again to give some context. I have been working on racial equity unofficially my whole life. It's just been in the past seven years that I have decided to work on it officially. I use the word unofficially because I was born into Apartheid South Africa and immigrated with my family into the specific sort of racism that can only be found in the so-called desegregated south of the United States. I have had to negotiate my racial identity since almost before I was born and moving to rural North Carolina in the 80s only exacerbated my constant need to define myself in order to fit into predominantly white spaces.

Here, too, is where KM named something that I had been doing my entire life. You recall I talked about doing workstyle assessments as part of KM and OD. When I did my Myers-Briggs Assessment, I found to my surprise that I'm in

introvert preference, BUT I operate as an extrovert. When I had a think about why I had been operating outside of my preferences, I traced it back to landing in a very racist North Carolina when I was young.

I was a relatively quiet child and preferred to observe rather than participate but being thrust into a society in which I neither looked nor spoke like anyone else put me in an inadvertent spotlight. It wasn't intentional, but I created a persona behind which I could hide so that I could figure out what the hell was going on around me.

When I talk to other introvert preferences, especially other immigrants, my experience isn't unique. We all have these "feelers" we send out so that we can assess the situation and figure out how we fit into it.

Landing in a Situation with Unwritten Rules is Terrifying

Anyone who's ever walked into a situation and has no clue what's going on, but must contribute anyway, will understand how disconcerting it is. For most of us, when we walk into our organizations on the first day, sure, we're given the standard onboarding and our department may have further training on how to do our jobs, but we're all left to our own devices when it comes to figuring out the culture.

Everyone knows what that feels like, but for the Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) community, especially immigrants, walking into predominantly white institutions (PWI) can be a minefield of triggering events. In my sector, philanthropy, for example, 92% of CEOs are white, 83% of executive staff and 67% of program staff is white.¹ That means that we all have to play by the rules of the dominant culture and that dominant culture happens to be white. For a better understanding of what that looks like, please take a look at Tema Okun's White Supremacy Culture document.²

As I learned the ins and outs of KM and used the tools, I kept asking questions about whether the tools being used took race into account and the answer was usually no.

Let's take the MBTI situation, for example. Some organizations require a workstyle test to be taken before an offer is extended, so getting the "wrong" answer really can affect your trajectory in the workplace.

¹ <http://www.d5coalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/D5-SOTW-2016-Final-web-pages.pdf>.

² Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun, *Dismantling Racism, A Workbook for Social Change Groups* (ChangeWork, 2001).

Many of the statements assume certain things about the individual taking them. Here are three examples of what you're asked to rank:

- You regularly make new friends
- You usually stay calm, even under a lot of pressure
- You spend a lot of your free time exploring various random topics that pique your interest

Take the first one, “you regularly make new friends.” When you're a member of the BIPOC community and you operate in PWI, it's tricky. We tend to befriend those who remind us of ourselves in some way. We look for people who have the same cultural references, the same commute woes, the same alma mater, so when the people around you share none of those things, it's that much harder to make friends.

How about “you usually stay calm, even under a lot of pressure”? Pressure from what? From whom? Let me tell you a secret. I think about my racial identity every single day, sometimes multiple times a day. Not because I want to, but because I'm forced to do so by society. Whenever an unarmed Black man is shot by the police, whenever I'm reminded that Black women make an average of 54 cents for every dollar a white man makes, whenever learning about the brutal history of slavery in this country is considered uncomfortable for the white children, the pressure intensifies.

As Shenequa Golding writes in her article *Maintaining Professionalism in the Age of Black Death* is . . . a Lot, “I don't know who decided that being professional was loosely defined as being divorced of total humanity, but whoever did they've aided, unintentionally maybe, in a unique form of suffocation . . . [T]he belief that only the part of me that fattens your bottom line is allowed in the workplace, is stifling.”

This is magnified for young [B]lack professionals who are recruited for their culture, but told, in so many words, that their [B]lackness and the struggles that come with it are to be left at the door.

Can we compare the pressure of being suffocated by society to needing to meet a deadline for a report that's due?

Lastly, “you spend a lot of your free time exploring various random topics that pique your interest.” Again, what does free time mean? I have only anecdotal evidence, but let me tell you, the BIPOC folks in my community, regardless of income (because I know you thought it), don't have a lot of free time. Whether it's having to work two or three jobs because we invariably get paid less than our white colleagues or hustling to be invited to speak in our area of expertise, or write a book, or simply worrying about keeping our children alive

when much of the United States has abdicated that responsibility, not much of our time is free.

It is why creating conversations by leading with love is not always possible. I prefer to create conversations that lead with justice. If we ignore the impact that racism has on our workplaces, especially in the US, we can't expect anything to change and, frankly, for many people, that's just fine. The system that has been built to foster inequity has rewarded them with power, money, and status. If those are the values we want to embrace, then we can continue down this path. But if we want to imagine a world in which everyone is encouraged to lead with brilliance, we have to build trust in ourselves and in each other.

What does all of this have to do with KM and the book you'll be reading? Everything.

When I discovered KM, and specifically the kind of KM that John teaches, it opened worlds for me. It is not a discipline that tries to make us all fit into the same mold or that teaches us the same lessons. It encourages us to recognize what we have to offer and build networks that strengthen our connections and our common goals.

What is the Conversation that couldn't take place without you?

John and David Gurteen (who wrote the Afterword to this book) have, in my opinion, taken KM/knowledge services to the next level. Or to a different one, depending on your point of view. You'll read about conversational leadership (CL) and I hope that it will lead you to the same kind of challenging and joyful conversations and ideals that I now get to experience on a regular basis.

One of the founding principles of CL is to find the conversations that wouldn't happen without you being a part of them. The conversations that John and I have had over the course of our friendship run the gamut. But what I treasure most is the promise that the conversation will always continue. I hope that by turning the page, you will find your way into conversations with yourself, with others, and with John that could never have happened if you hadn't picked up this book.

May you find the path to your own brilliance.