

Kevin Manion at Consumer Reports: The Leadership/Knowledge Services Connection

Not that Kevin Manion is on a mission. He is very interested in connecting leadership and knowledge services delivery, but he would not characterize it as a mission. He is much too modest to put such a grand term to his ideas and his professional philosophy. In fact, Manion would probably blush a little if he heard someone refer to the things he thinks about as a “philosophy,” but that’s exactly what it is.

Kevin Manion believes that knowledge professionals have the skills, the competencies, and the general understanding of the organization and management of information to be knowledge leaders, both in the organizations where they are employed and in the larger society. And he is not at all shy about describing that role to others, whether the listener is a colleague, another member of the knowledge services profession, or one of the many people who interact with him as a knowledge professional on a day-to-day basis.

So while what he is doing might not be a “mission,” in the old-fashioned evangelical sense of that term, Manion’s combination of enthusiasm and intellectual reasoning comes close. When you speak with him, you know that this is a man who believes that—for people who work in the several disciplines of what we call “knowledge services”—this is the dawning of a new day.

Manion himself earns his living in a constant state of listening, learning, interacting, networking, obtaining information, delivering information, making decisions, and, not to put too fine a point on it, with his staff of knowledge professionals influencing decision-making in the parent organization. At Consumer Reports, located in Yonkers NY, Manion’s title is Associate Director for Strategic Planning and Information Services, and it is in linking those two areas of responsibility that Manion elicits leadership from his own team and, of course, provides leadership himself.

The result is a combination of strategic planning and information services provision that supports and in many cases leads to direct participation in mission-critical decision making throughout the organization. Manion and his team not only identify the information needed and direct the knowledge flow, they come to the table as full participants, contributing to and influencing the decision-making process. In any scenario, that’s a hands-on definition of leadership. And right up front, the knowledge services element is integral, critical, and taken seriously. The decisions could not be made (or, at least, could not be made as efficiently and as effectively) without serious attention to the level of information management, knowledge management, and strategic learning that Manion and his team provide.

The best case in point is the company’s Content Development Teams. Consumer Reports is a publishing house, known universally for the excellence not only of the organization’s ratings and practical descriptions of products and services aimed at consumers, but for the quality of its publications. What is published, how the magazines are focused, is the responsibility of the Content Development Teams. There are 18 of them, each made up of five employees: two technical department staff, two editorial staff, and one information/knowledge professional.

That staff line-up wasn’t always the case. Before Manion’s arrival on the scene, the role of the information services unit was one of providing information, a support function. The “real work” of the Content Development Team, the intellectual and management effort, was carried out without the advice and recommendations of the information staff, despite the fact that it was the information staff who understood what information (both internal and external) was available and relevant, who knew what content had been used before, and who were carrying around the corporate memory of whatever topic was under discussion.

“That didn’t seem to me to be the best way to use the expertise of our knowledge professionals,” Manion says, “so I decided to take on the challenge. I made a case—a pretty good case, I suppose—to have our staff work with the Content Development Teams. It was a battle, but we won it, and now the teams include one of us, to serve as the team’s information/knowledge ‘guru,’ the information specialist. It’s an important role for our knowledge professionals, and it’s a critical one. I don’t see how we could manage the work of the Content Development Teams if they didn’t have this professional knowledge management expertise as part of the effort.”

This “insourcing,” this including “expert research support” or delegating a “knowledge management specialist” (it’s called different things in different organizations) for projects is an increasingly recognized trend in knowledge services management. Is it successful with the Content Development Teams at Consumer Reports?

Manion doesn’t miss a beat.

“Absolutely,” he says. “In fact, bringing a knowledge professional to the table, an employee with some degree of subject strength and professional expertise in identifying and locating the information that’s required is a staff function whose time has come. I expect to see more of it, in all kinds of knowledge services operations.”

It is that kind of awareness, that knowing what’s going on in other organizations, that gives Kevin Manion a leg up when it comes to finding opportunities to innovate. And he is always looking for ideas, always searching for those professional colleagues who are, as the cliché puts it, “thinking out of the box.” It’s a search that keeps him active in a variety of professional activities, including serious volunteer work with the Special Libraries Association, the 12,000-member international organization for information professionals. In 2006-2007, Manion will serve as President of SLA’s New York Chapter, the organization’s largest, and he is currently Secretary of the organization’s Business and Finance Division (a two-year terms that ends in 2006). Both are positions that put him in contact with leaders in the corporate, editorial, and content management communities, and Manion is quite open about the value of these professional connections.

“For one thing,” he says, “we have a responsibility to our organizations to provide knowledge leadership, and it is through knowing others who are successful in this work that we can bring innovation back to our parent organizations. I certainly believe we have the ability, the knowledge of concepts, and many of us have the skills, but sometimes we ourselves are not very accepting of what we can do. We don’t always do a very good job of acknowledging our own skills and abilities, and I think that’s where knowledge leadership in the organization comes into play. It’s a role we have to play, whether it’s expected of us or whether we take it. It’s in the workplace that we see—and act on—the connection between the organization’s intellectual capital and the organization’s success, but we are not always perceived as being able to take a leadership role. And that’s a situation that leads, for some, to a lack of professional confidence in what our role in the organization can be. We can’t do that. We have to grab that professional confidence from somewhere, and for me it’s looking around at all the successful professional colleagues I know and taking what I learn from them back to my workplace.”

But to attain a leadership role in the organization, even if you want to assume the role without being asked, requires some acceptance on the part of the employing organization. How does a knowledge professional, a knowledge services manager, create credibility? How do you connect with the CFO in the organization?

“Let me give you a couple of examples,” Manion responds. “Our department has recently taken on the centralized management of information resources, taken on a broader role of managing contracts on a general basis. Working with the financial team, we now have contracts and licensing agreements done in one place—our shop—rather than in individual departments. It’s an action that puts the management of funds for information resources in one place, on a regular basis. That’s both strategic planning and information services—the functions, that is, not the department’s title—connecting for the benefit of the overall organization. It’s an enterprise-wide benefit. Similarly, our unit is dealing with corporate records

and archives, working with the new legal counsel, not only educating her about how assets are managed, but coming up with a full review of retention schedules, compliance planning and documentation, that sort of thing. When you're working at these levels and with these issues, you stand a good chance of ending up driving the decision about what products are looked at and what is going to be used."

And there's a third success story, one Manion is enthusiastic about because it segues so smoothly into the strategic (performance-centered) learning "piece" of knowledge services. He and his team have taken a good look at the training and learning picture in the company, and he has chosen as one of his goals for 2006 the development of an enterprise-wide training program, to train staff on resources that are available for research, that staff have access to. It will be an activity with a double-edged benefit, Manion says.

"Not only does taking on such a responsibility give us the opportunity of explaining to internal clients what kind of work our unit can actually provide, it's taking the extra step of better understanding what their needs are and what they might be looking for that is not being provided."

Those references to the enterprise-wide training program and to the different internal clients connect to yet another management trend being increasingly recognized nowadays. More and more, we are hearing about the holistic role of knowledge services in the parent organization. As a management methodology, knowledge services is being used to break down silos and cut through smokestacks, a situation Manion is happily observing in his workplace. And when he describes what's happening, one of the pleasures of hearing him is his lack of interest in taking the credit for himself. He delights in describing how the team takes the initiative and provides benefits that get recognized, a good example of which came up not too long ago. Here's how he painted the picture:

"We were conducting interviews to assess the ongoing information needs of Human Resources staff," he said, "to recommend current awareness tools that could increase collaboration and effectiveness. Originally, HR had asked us to set up alerts for them on Nexis, but the team member assigned to this project—instead of just setting up alerts—met with each HR staff member and analyzed their needs. Then the staffer drew some conclusions and presented her approach to the HR staff over a lunch meeting. As a result, this staffer's demonstrated understanding of approaching research projects earned her a promotion, and I asked her to present her approach at one of our own staff meetings and publicly acknowledged her success. That's the kind of leadership our group brings to the company, and this staff member exemplified it perfectly."

The leadership responsibility is there, and it is a responsibility Kevin Manion has no interest in avoiding. Indeed, one of the most important projects his team has undertaken forced him to call on all his reserves of leadership, ingenuity, and just plain common sense, for Consumer Reports has undertaken to compile a pictorial history of CU testing, with images drawn from the company's archives. The book will be published by Arcadia as part of the Images of America series in early 2006, and it was a huge project for Manion, involving selecting hundreds of images, reading hundreds of reports from the magazine dating back to the 1930s, and re-reading important key consumer works. The leadership/knowledge services connection? Manion was responsible for coordinating work with various groups in the organization, bringing all parties to the table, getting sign-off from corporate leaders (the CEO called the book "superb"), and providing overall supervision for the entire project.

That's the kind of leadership and knowledge services connection that works, and for Kevin Manion at Consumer Reports, it works well. Its success shows.