Corporate Lichens

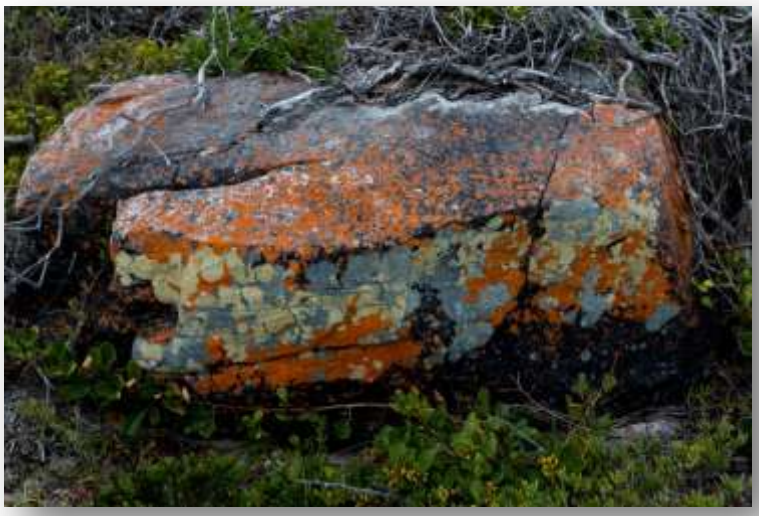
Steven Shepard
Steve@ShepardComm.com
18 April 2013

Even though I work in the world of telecom, IT and media, I am, deep in my heart, a biologist. I actually did undergraduate work in marine biology, and my love of the natural world has never left me. I am and always will be a frustrated field biologist, which I suspect is the reason I so dearly love being out in the middle of nowhere with my cameras. But, I digress.

One of the things I am most attracted to in nature is a rather strange organism known as a lichen. Lichens are called *composite organisms* because they are actually two organisms living in a symbiotic relationship – that is, a relationship that is mutually supportive and good for both of them. Most lichens are made up of a fungus, known by those who care as a mycobiont, and a photosynthetic organism such as a green algae, known as a photobiont. The fungus surrounds the algae, protecting it from the elements and providing a structure to the combined organism. The algae produces food through photosynthesis, feeding both partners.

A remarkable thing about lichens is that they are extraordinarily hardy. They are found literally everywhere on earth: in the Arctic and Antarctic, in harsh deserts, and along coastlines that are pounded by salty surf. In fact, they've been taken into space and exposed for 15 days to the vacuum of space without any ill effects. They are slow-growing and a large one may be hundreds of years old; research proves that as they get older and larger, they may also become more hardy.

You probably think I'm digressing again, but I'm not – not really. I'm always looking for the story that ties things together, and the other day, while trying to identify a unique lichen I had recently photographed, a though occurred to me: Lichens are a lot like corporations.



A lichen comprises two very distinct organisms, both of which are relatively fragile. Fungi and algae are not known for being particularly hardy or resilient organisms; neither of them could withstand the rigors of living in the conditions where lichens thrive. By forging a "cooperative alliance," these two delicate organisms create something that is adaptable, flexible, long-lived, and hardy – able to resist pretty much whatever is thrown at it.

This, it seems to me, is how successful corporations operate. None of the business units of the typical enterprise stand on their own, at least not very effectively; but when they work as a cohesive whole they realize the true value of that old adage, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." In the case of a lichen, both the algae and the fungus give up their independence in favor of survival of the combined organism. But what do – *or should* - corporate organisms (business units) give up? And what do they get in return?

The answer may surprise you. Clearly they give up a degree of autonomy to be part of the corporation. But to be truly successful, each business unit must also give up the corporate equivalent of fungal protection and food produced from algal photosynthesis: *organizational knowledge.*

Most corporations today thrive on knowledge. But humans being humans, we all ascribe to an ages-old belief that "knowledge is power." And since a primitive mandate of the thinking creature is to be strong and powerful, we naturally equate "knowledge is power" to "OK, if I'm

going to be powerful I have to hoard my knowledge." Unfortunately, this doesn't work. Knowledge, especially in the fast-moving world of technology, has a very short half-life – it ages extremely rapidly and loses its competitive value at an exponential rate. The only way to retain the value of each bit of knowledge is to allow the individual bits to rub and bump against each other, symbiotically sharing to create supersets of knowledge that can be wielded as competitive weapons. So what's the message here? Knowledge-sharing is important, and the mandate to create a culture of knowledge-sharing within the enterprise has never been more urgent. The more knowledge is shared, the more valuable it becomes; and the more each individual shares what they know, the more relevant and valuable each individual becomes. It's as simple as that.

There's one other lichen-oriented analogy that I should share. As hardy as they are, lichens are extremely sensitive to atmospheric pollutants, and are therefore good indicators of the overall health of the environment – the canary in the coal mine, as it were. If pollution reduces the sunlight available to the algal part of the lichen, it produces less food and the organism withers; similarly, if the ability of the fungus to protect its algal counterpart is weakened by corrosive elements in the atmosphere, the same thing happens. Enterprise business units, if they share knowledge with each other, are also analogous to lichens and canaries in that they have the ability to serve as early warning systems to each other of coming events that their counterparts - may not be aware of – *but only if they actively engage in knowledge-sharing*.

Thanks for reading.