

Communities of Practice

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A community of practice (CP) is a group of peers who share a passion for a particular field of knowledge. They are informally bound, and meet together face-to-face or electronically. While they may share books and other documents (codified knowledge), the primary focus of their meetings is the sharing of experiences and new ideas (hard-to-codify “tacit knowledge”) that members can use in practice.

Origins on the Concept

The term “community of practice” is credited to Etienne Wenger, but he gives the credit to his colleague Jean Lave (an act of grace and humility rarely seen in the academic or business world).

Lave and Wenger (1991) did research for their first book with the initial intention of “rescuing the idea of apprenticeship” (p.29). After studying various apprenticeship arrangements (e.g., midwives, tailors, and meat cutters), they

emerged with an appreciation for the social aspects of learning. They found that much of the learning was taking place from peer to peer, rather than from the teaching of the master.

In his academic book, entitled *Communities of Practice*, Wenger (1998, p.3) accuses our educational system of being based on incorrect assumptions. He lists the following four false assumptions:

1. learning is an individual process,
2. learning has a beginning and an end,
3. learning is best separated from the rest of our activities,
4. learning is the result of teaching.

Clearly, corporate training and development has been based on the same assumptions. The ongoing social interaction of professional peers should be encouraged and supported by our organizations, not stifled. The learning process should be integrated into practice, not separated from it.

In my opinion, social interaction between seasoned professionals is even more important than it is between apprentices because the seasoned professional is

working to refine advanced tacit knowledge.

The Value of CPs

CPs provide value in multiple forms to many groups. The beneficiaries include the individual members, the sponsoring organization, and the profession or trade.

A CP provides value to the professional development process of its individual members. Members develop a common body of knowledge, a common set of practices, and a common set of values. In addition, CPs provide:

- access to expertise
- connection to the field's growing body of knowledge
- a forum for sharing problems
- awareness of employment opportunities
- enhanced professional reputation
- personal relationships
- a sense of common identity

CPs are also very valuable to their sponsoring organizations. They can serve

as the primary development method for the organization's professionals, as they do at American Management Systems and the World Bank. CPs also provide:

- critical knowledge to support business strategy
- diagnosis and solutions for business problems
- higher quality decisions
- synergies across organizational units
- reduced time and costs
- forecasts for new developments
- analysis and feasibility of alternative strategies/tactics
- higher retention rates for professionals (more on this later)

Finally, CPs clearly promote leading-edge thinking in the profession or trade. "Communities of practice are in the best position to codify knowledge because they can combine its tacit and explicit aspects" (Wenger, et al., 2002, p.9).

The cumulative nature of the knowledge in any field today is growing so rapidly it is almost impossible for any single individual to master it. The need for multiple perspectives (a collective approach) is a critical contribution of CPs to any

field. (See Wenger, 1998, pp.86-102 and 134-148 for further discussion of the collective nature of learning.)

The Structure of CPs

In their practitioner-targeted book, *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) state, “Communities of practice are a practical way to frame the task of managing knowledge” (p.x). CPs provide an infrastructure for the transfer of tacit knowledge.

CPs should complement the existing organizational structure, not replace it. Project teams should be used to complete specific tasks. Formal work groups should be given the responsibility for delivery of a product or service. The sole purpose of the CP should be to capture and transfer knowledge.

CPs at their best are self-organizing; passionate volunteers make the best members. By their nature, they tend to resist supervision or interference from management. So, can organizational leaders do anything to help create and nurture these free-flowing CPs? The answer is yes. Management can not “mandate” CPs, but management can identify potential CPs and provide an infrastructure to support

them (Wenger & Snyder, 2001).

Some organizations provide substantial support for their CPs. American Management Systems (AMS) and the World Bank have “adopted the community of practice as the foundation for their knowledge management strategy” (Wenger & Snyder, 2001, p.13). These two organizations contribute large amounts of time and money to support their CPs. Both organizations believe it’s a good investment.

While corporate universities (see Beitler, 2005) provide an umbrella for all organizational learning activities, CPs are the structure necessary for work *in the trenches*. “Conventional structures do not address knowledge-related problems as effectively as they do problems of performance and accountability” (Wenger, et al., 2002, p.11). Knowledge-related problems are effectively handled through the CP structure.

Wenger, et al. (2002, p.27) suggest structuring or building the CP around three fundamental elements: domain, community, and practice.

The domain of the CP defines the common ground, or set of issues, that brings the members together. Initially, the domain may be the only thing of value to the new members. (A sense of community develops subsequently.) So, the

domain must be clearly defined. The domain delineates the boundaries of the CP. “Knowing the boundaries and the leading edge of the domain enables members to decide exactly what is worth sharing” and “to recognize the potential in tentative or half-baked ideas” (Wenger, et al., 2002, p.28). If the CP’s domain has strategic relevance, it is critical that the organization recognize its importance and provide support.

The community element is essential for trust and camaraderie to develop. Without this element, members will be unwilling to share ideas, admit ignorance, or ask for help. The importance of open, honest, and trusting relationships in professional development is discussed in detail in Whetten’s (2000) work. The sense of community identity brings members to the table even when they don’t have a burning issue to discuss. The social bond becomes as strong, or stronger, than the domain.

The element of practice distinguishes the CP from a mere social group. CPs provide critical practice support. “Members use each other as sounding boards, build on each other’s ideas, and provide a filtering mechanism to deal with knowledge overload” (Wenger, et al., 2002, p.34). The majority of the CP

members must be seasoned practitioners. CPs are not for novices. Novices should be devoting their time to the codified knowledge in the field (e.g., books and articles). Ideally, seasoned professionals should bring their real-world problems to the CP, gather ideas and advice, and then apply the ideas and advice in their practice. After application, these professionals should report their experiences back to the CP. McDermott (1999) discusses this point in more detail; he refers to it as “double-knit.”

Cultivating CPs

Zemke (1999) quotes Senge as saying, “[S]ignificant innovations must be diffused through informal, self-organizing networks, through horizontal communities of practice. How you strengthen these communities is the key to how you disseminate innovation and maintain the innovators” (p.49).

We tend to think of CPs as self-organizing, spontaneous entities that are outside of the control of management. There is certainly some truth in that. But, an organization’s management, once convinced on the value of CPs, can do a lot to cultivate its CPs.

Wenger, et al. (2002) offer seven design principles for all of us to be aware of. I will summarize them here. They begin by saying, “Because communities of practice are organic, designing them is more a matter of shepherding their evolution than creating them from scratch. Design elements should be catalysts for a community’s natural evolution” (p.51).

New CPs can be created from currently existing personal networks. Many potential CPs are already linked by electronic bulletin boards or memberships in professional societies.

It’s true that, “Only insiders can appreciate the issues at the heart of the domain, the knowledge that is important to share, the challenges their field faces, and the latent potential in emerging ideas and techniques,” but “it often takes an outsider perspective to help members see the possibilities” (Wenger, et al., 2002, p.54). This role of educator/coach is very valuable to the CP and to the sponsoring organization.

Interestingly, Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasize the importance of inviting different levels of participation. Unlike a work team that requires high levels of commitment to complete a task on time, CPs are not task-oriented. “Peripheral”

members benefit from watching debates between core members, and may eventually become core or active members themselves. Wenger, et al. suggest, “Rather than force participation, successful communities ‘build benches’ for those on the sidelines” (2002, p.57).

Successful CPs must provide both public and private space. Public space includes the large events that are open to all members. Private space allows time for one-on-one relationships (e.g., during breaks, between meetings). “Every phone call, e-mail exchange, or problem-solving conversation strengthens the relationships within the community” (Wenger, et al., 2002, p.59). The community coordinator should “work this space” between meetings. (More on the role of community coordinator later.)

CPs should be maintained as a “neutral space” (Oldenberg’s term), separate from job responsibilities. “Unlike team members, community members can offer advice on a project with no risk of getting entangled in it; they can listen to advice with no obligation to take it” (Wenger, et al., 2002, p.61).

The Community Coordinator

I used to believe planning and structuring were the enemies of the informal, volunteer-natures of CPs. I was the member of two energetic CPs. The free-flowing knowledge appeared to be completely spontaneous, without any planning, and without any leadership. How naive! I was blissfully unaware of the role of the community coordinator.

Studies by both the American Productivity & Quality Center (1999) and the Corporate Executive Board (1996) found the role of community coordinator to be critical for CP success. Wenger, et al. (2002, p.80) lists the key functions of the community coordinator:

- identifying important issues of the domain
- planning and facilitating community events
- linking members (by crossing unit boundaries and brokering knowledge assets)
- fostering development of individual members
- building the “practice” or knowledge base (lessons learned, best practices, tools and methods, learning events)
- assessing the health of the community

Obviously, the community coordinator must have a high level of commitment. Substantial organizational support may be necessary to fulfill this commitment. McKinsey gives its coordinators (“practice leaders”) status and budget authority to maximize the work of its CPs (Wenger, et al., 2002, p.248).

Community coordinators do not have to be the leading experts in the field. They do need to be passionate about the knowledge domain and be well-respected. An ideal candidate for this position is a midcareer professional who believes strongly in the value of networking. Interpersonal skills are a must.

Life Stages of CPs

While a detailed discussion of the stages of CP development is beyond the scope of this article (Wenger et al. (2002) devote two chapters to the subject), I would like to share a few brief comments here.

CPs are organic, life-like entities. Birth, growth, and death are natural for CPs. Wenger, et al. (2002) speak of five stages of CP development (potential, coalescing, maturing, stewardship, and transformation). Every community

coordinator should be able to identify the current stage of his or her CP.

Wenger, et al. (2002) summarize their comments by saying, “[H]aving a sense of stages and associated issues helps you foresee problems you are likely to face, understand the changing needs of the community, and take appropriate action” (p.70).

Summary

Unfortunately, the term “knowledge management” (KM) has been frequently associated with codification only. Codification KM systems focus on codifying explicit knowledge for storage in electronic databases. Most of my clients have a need to codify more of their standard operating procedures (SOPs). These codified SOPs can then be made available for use by all organizational members worldwide.

Codification should be the “starting point” for any organization’s KM strategy. Then senior management, with the guidance of an OL consultant, must determine how the organization will transfer and development its tacit knowledge.

Tacit knowledge, by its nature, defies codification. Communities of practice provide an excellent vehicle for maximizing the value of the organization’s tacit

knowledge. Effective communities of practice can lead to a sustainable competitive advantage.

Conclusion

Communities of practice are powerful tools that are used by leading-edge organizations. For more information on communities of practice check out chapter 5 of Mike's book, "Strategic Organizational Learning," where Mike discusses CPs and other emerging knowledge management topics.

<http://www.strategic-organizational-learning.com/>

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