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A Primer on “Communities of Practice”

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Introduction: What is a “Community of Practice”?

A Community of Practice (CoP, for short here) is a formal approach to what happens naturally when practitioners working on a common set of problems or issues gather to exchange tips and techniques, tell stories or ask one another for advice about various aspects of their work. Just as software engineers talk informally about how to debug a piece of code or doctors consult with one another about a difficult medical case, any group of practitioners—salespeople, groups of CEOs, landscape architects, auto mechanics-- who share a common endeavor will often tend to “talk shop” when they get together, and in so doing learn from one another about how to approach a particular problem they might be working on. It might take place over dinner and drinks, at a conference, or “around the water cooler;” it’s a natural impulse of humans to find connections with one another, and seek advice about work, hobbies, or other interests of mutual concern.

A CoP is a more disciplined approach to this basic form of “social learning”—a process of bringing like-minded practitioners together, and helping them work on problems of mutual concern through structured inquiry, moderated Q&A, discussion of case studies, capture and codification of learning, etc..

What Benefits Do They Offer? Why Should Someone Participate?

People participate in CoPs for many of the same reasons that they gather at water-coolers or join like-minded practitioners for lunch or an afternoon “bull session”—to get smarter about something they are working on, and build relationships that can lead to greater learning in the future. Though such informal gatherings also take place for social and other reasons, the value of a well-run CoP is fundamentally about performance—helping an individual practitioner to grow professionally through ongoing exchange with other practitioners and the knowledge they can offer to other peers.

Business and other organizations are increasingly sponsoring CoPs (or equivalents under similar names) because they can help foster the development of critical competencies needed by the company to achieve its strategic goals and improve its overall performance as well. Hospitals benefit when doctors get smarter from one another, as do automobile manufacturers when engineers work together to develop knowledge for more sophisticated approaches to design or production. Though there is often an underlying social dimension to successful CoPs, the engine that drives them must ultimately be learning in service of better and enhanced practice.

Who Invented Communities of Practice? Where Did the Idea Come From?

Some version of this idea has been around for a long time, and because the underlying concept is a fundamentally natural and human instinct, it's hard to talk about anyone "inventing" the idea. For many years now people have been talking about, and in other cases developing "learning networks," "communities of interest", "learning circles", and other named incarnations of pretty much the same thing. The concept as a source of formal professional and organizational development has been of great interest to consultants, business academics, and active managers in the last twenty years, and there is now a rich body of literature and practice about the why and wherefore of such processes.

What Makes for A Successful Community of Practice?

CoPs can be found in various shapes and sizes, but certain attributes and conditions for success tend to be seen in most cases. Firstly they are organized around three components: 1) a common domain of knowledge and inquiry of interest to all participants (auto engineering, weather reporting, selling industrial equipment, etc), 2) a group of peer practitioners who develop some sense of membership and mutual accountability to the candid and constructive exchange of learning with one another, and 3) an agreed set of processes, infrastructure and practices whereby the members of the community engage with one another (story-telling protocols, meeting schedules, learning agenda, process for codifying lessons learned, website for posting group materials, etc).

Secondly, successful CoPs are self-governing, at least to some degree. The members share responsibility for the content and processes of the community, and often take turns in leading their meetings. If a single leader is appointed, s/he nonetheless must depend on the member of the community for active input in how the membership group will work with itself. CoPs that are "mandated" or led by someone insensitive to the needs and interests of the members ultimately collapse. Successful ones are typically managed and maintained by some kind of coordinator, with overall leadership shared among practicing members.

How Do CoPs Work in Practice?

CoPs operate on the basis of the needs and protocols of the members themselves. That said, certain patterns tend to distinguish the successful ones. These include regular meetings (at least some of which are face-to-face), a clear "learning agenda" and process and discipline to pursue that; a commitment to performance and development of members and the group; a conscious effort to combine "action learning and practice" with reflection and "lessons learned" discussions; and management processes, culture-setting, and infrastructure to maintain member engagement and facilitate discussion and learning on some ongoing basis. CoPs often utilize some kind of technology (website, chat boards, etc) but do not necessarily require it. A huge and common mistake is to equate such technology with the existence of a CoP per se. Technology is an agent or tool to facilitate the social learning, not a definition of it.