

Leadership Issues within a Community of Practice

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INTRODUCTION

Communities of practice are, and must be, fundamentally voluntary membership groups since they are about sharing of knowledge and expertise, something which cannot be effectively forced. Accordingly, no single person has positional leadership in a community of practice, as there is no formal structure in place to create such hierarchy.

However, wherever groups of people exist with any kind of shared task, there is leadership present, and leadership issues are repeatedly emerging aspects of the informal dynamics of that group or community of practice. It has often been noted that there actually is no such thing as a leaderless group. Informal leadership behaviours will come to the fore at certain points in any group's life, whether consciously evoked or not (Tyson, 1998).

Given this scenario, leadership exists in a community of practice (CoP) by informal agreement and negotiation. CoPs usually find it necessary to designate a leader for purposes of coordination and clarification, and possibly for direction of communications and to help structure the group interactions. Leaders are therefore created by the 'followers', and have only as much authority as the CoP group is willing to invest in the leadership role. Much research has been done into the psycho-dynamics of group relations, and it is often said that we place a little too much emphasis in our investigations and our speech on the phenomenon of leadership, when we also know that leaders, especially of voluntary groups, cannot function without followers who 'permit' the leader to act on their behalf. Leadership and 'followership' are thus flipsides of the same coin, and one cannot be understood without the other. Perhaps we should therefore focus on the needs of the followers to see what kind of leader will help the CoP serve its purposes (Long, 1992; Hirschhorn, 1991, 1997).

In the CoP, leaders will aid the workings of the community and therefore be granted limited authority by the group on the basis of:

- charismatic personality,
- superior expert knowledge,
- outstanding breadth of knowledge (not necessarily a specialist or expert, but holding some knowledge of a wide domain of interest to the CoP),
- high professional standing and reputation,
- high capacity to organise and mobilise the CoP (i.e., facilitation skills), or
- some combination of some or all of these aspects. (Tyson, 1998)

As with all voluntary groups, leaders with limited authority rely heavily on their capacity for positively influencing the work of the CoP and the interactions of its members. This influence takes the form of a number of leadership behaviours that are most likely to sustain the followers and keep the issue of leadership as a constructively assigned informal role. It is worth noting that leadership in this sense is a series of *functions*, and can be shared by more than one person. However, in order to avoid confused communications and expectations, a designated leader is normally more able to productively assign and direct other contributions of a leadership nature, setting in place a negotiated sharing of the role and functions.

The leadership functions of highest value to the CoP will be:

- balancing of members' interests and articulation of agenda items for the CoP, including identifying priority rankings on certain issues;
- attending to inclusiveness of the CoP, actively working at drawing in contributions from all members;

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- facilitating interactions of the CoP, chairing, clarifying, encouraging, summarising, challenging at times, and articulating the issues the CoP may be struggling to articulate;
- especially encouraging a culture of egalitarianism and respect for 'junior partners', so that neither experience nor strong personality dominates the CoP.

These leadership behaviours relate to both the *task* elements of the CoP and the *relationship* elements (Hersey, Blanchard & Johnson, 2000), as they are described in the Situational Leadership literature. Task elements are more to do with getting the work of the CoP underway and done, and often require a degree of control and directiveness. Relationship elements are more to do with drawing the group together and maintaining its working relationships and sense of connectedness (to each other and to the CoP's tasks). Noticeably, the actions for leaders of CoPs are more to do with the relationship axis, except where some particular crisis might arise which demands urgent action and interaction from the community, in which rare case a more directive leadership style will work best for a short time.

Overall, leaders of communities of practice need to be prepared to renegotiate their leadership status frequently ("If you would prefer that I not operate as leader, that's OK with me, and we should decide to choose someone else now"), always recognising that they have no power other than that which the CoP members voluntarily surrender upwards to them. This kind of power base does not suit individuals who like clear positional authority, but favours those with high tolerance for ambiguity and strong 'people' skills. These are most likely to be able to draw a CoP together and hold it so for a sufficient period of time for it to operate as a sharing community.

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KEY TERMS

Facilitation: The leadership contributions of structuring, enabling and encouraging good group interaction and process, normally with low reliance on positional authority and content expertise, but high reliance on communication and interpersonal skills and presence.

Formal Leader: One who is formally appointed or authorized by either the group or an external party to hold an officially designated leadership role for the group or team. Such a leader may or may not display strong leadership behaviour.

Informal Leader: One who demonstrates substantial leadership behaviour even though not officially appointed or designated to hold such authority. Informal leaders often emerge tacitly from within a group.

Leadership: The dynamic phenomenon in group life where an individual or individuals consciously or unconsciously influence and direct the activities and interactions of that group. Leadership may be formally constructed and embodied within an organisational role, or emerge informally from the interactions of the group by tacit processes.

Leadership Behaviours: The various actions that leaders contribute to group and team life that may be generally categorised as *task related* or *relationship oriented*. *Task behaviours* aim to structure, direct and progress the work of the group. *Relationship behaviours* aim to address the way the group members feel about and interact with each other, with the leader, and with the task they are tackling. The holding and communicating of a vision



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