Leadership Issues in Communities of Practice

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INTRODUCTION

In another contribution in this encyclopedia, we presented the construct social structure as the context in which interactions between CoP members take place. Social structure has been defined along several dimensions, for example, group (CoP) longevity, norms for conflict resolution, and coordination of daily exchange. It has been disputed whether social structure can be deliberately influenced by management, that is, whether CoPs represent a social collective that is manageable to a degree as in, for example, a formal project team.

In this article, we argue that the social structure of CoPs can be influenced by using a certain leadership style as an influence tactic. We believe that for influencing the kind of social structure proposed for CoPs, transformational leadership is most suitable.

BACKGROUND

A prominent camp in leadership research differentiates between transformational and transactional leadership (Antonakis, Avorio & Sivasubramaniam, 2003; Avolio, Bass & Jung, 1999; Bass, 1985; Bass et al., 2003).

Transactional leadership denotes the situation where followers are rewarded contingent on the quality of carrying out their roles and assignments (Podsakoff, Todor & Skov, 1982). Transformational leadership, rooted in the notions of transforming leadership (Burns, 1978) and charismatic leadership (House, 1977), entails several dimensions derived by factor analyses, for example, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence. Roughly, it describes a situation where followers are intrinsically motivated to fulfill their role and tasks because they admire their leader for his or her personality or expert knowledge and share a strong identification with the proposed vision and mission.

We propose that transactional leadership is not suited to bring about knowledge creation in CoPs. The more active form of transactional leadership calls for closely monitoring deviances, mistakes, and errors in order to be able to take timely corrective action. However, this implies that explicit goals are formulated and a tight rule set for coordination is given. Without these explicit governing artifacts, a close monitoring is not possible. For CoPs, this is foreclosed by definition. A passive-avoidant form of transactional leadership called *laisser faire* is not beneficial for enabling learning processes in CoPs either. A laisser faire management *avoids* specifying any guideposts, that is, goals, expectations, and standards for interaction at all (Bass et al., 2003). This will leave CoP members without orientation and security about the support for and longevity of the learning collective.

Hence, we believe that transformational leadership (Antonakis et al., 2003; Avolio et al., 1999; Bass, 1985; Bass et al., 2003) fits most closely the characteristics of the proposed social structure in CoPs. First of all, transformational leadership ensures idealized influence, that is, being respected and trusted. Leading members of CoPs therefore adhere to norms and shared values in the CoP and thereby shape social structure. Second, transformational leadership brings about intellectual stimulation. Establishing CoPs that do not touch the very interests of potential contributors concerning intellectual stimulation will not lead to the emergence of social structure for relational social capital. Furthermore, since formal authority only coincidentally collapses with the kind of authority deployed for conflict resolution in CoPs, managers may create intellectual stimulation by explicitly and repeatedly claiming that conflicts have to be negoti-

ated on the basis of rational arguments rooted in deep expertise. Third, transformational leaders pay attention to individual growth by acting as coach or mentor. This is called individualized consideration. The concept of LPP also mirrors this learning and growth motive. Fourth, by espousing enthusiasm and optimism about the content of innovative practice in a CoP, inspirational motivation can be fostered (Bass, 1985; Bass et al., 2003).

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT AND CONCLUSION

Managers seeking to implement CoPs for difficult and knowledge intense work processes may gain some advice from this discussion. They might find that establishing and enforcing some basic and ballparking rules may enable situated learning in actual practice more than devising precise decision cut-off criteria, standardized conflict resolutions processes based on a given distribution of authority, or predetermined internal transfer prices. Stated differently, managers who exert transactional leadership (Antonakis et al., 2003; Avolio et al., 1999; Bass et al., 2003) most likely will not stimulate knowledge creation processes in CoPs.

Although more research touching on this subject of leadership for successful learning dynamics in CoPs is needed, we make the claim that transformational leadership especially enables learning in actual innovative practice whereas both the active and passive-avoidant forms of transactional leadership will restrict the potential learning benefits during innovative practice offered by CoPs. By choosing a suitable leadership style, one will be able to meet objections stating that CoPs are emerging social phenomena which can by no means be designed or implemented in a deliberate manner.

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KEY TERMS

Leadership: Leadership denotes first a constellation of a person who is called a leader and other individuals who are called followers. Main research areas are first traits of the leading individual, context factors of the situation where leadership takes place, and third, different influence tactics employed by the leading person.

Transactional leadership: An influence tactic that involves (a) contingent reward for performance, (b) management by exception, that is, leaders monitor their followers' behavior and performance and take corrective action only if deviations from targets occur, and (c) *laisser-faire* leadership, that is, non-leadership behavior failing to fulfill leadership responsibilities like taking a stance in important questions and needs for assistance and feedback (Bass, 1985; Bass et al., 2003).

Transformational leadership: An influence tactic that involves (a) idealized influence (e.g., leaders