Linking Organisational Culture and Communities of Practice

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The purpose of this article is to identify a link between organisational culture and communities of practice. We propose that the informal nature of communities of practice places great limitations in terms of management and control and that for their purpose—which is primarily to share tacit organisational knowledge and enhance organisational learning—it is fatalistic to try to impose and enforce control. Rather, these communities ought to be left alone to formulate their knowledge sharing activities, and management comes in to provide the support, both cognitive and practical in terms of resources, to ensure that time spent at work is productive, and the knowledge is well spread and used throughout. So, not only do we intend to identify a link between culture and communities of practice, but we will demonstrate that the former has great implications in the survival and success of the latter. A review of the most prolific literature is provided, followed by a debate about the relationship between these two distinct concepts, followed by our visions for the future.

EVOLUTION OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Communities of practice have become a hot topic of discussion of late. Their benefit to organisational development and work is immense in that they facilitate organisational communication and collaborative work and support knowledge sharing, which is fast becoming the standard for achieving greater competitive advantage. They bring together organisations that are both collocated and distributed and bridge the gap for distance work that is found particularly in the latter type, where there is a need for people to work in different locations, time zones, physical environments, and cultures.

Communities of practice have been described by Lave & Wenger (1991) as "as a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (p. 7). It is within these communities that new members come and learn from the more experienced members by participating in the practice with which the community is concerned. At the beginning, new members tend to be peripheral participants, those who observe the more experienced members performing certain tasks and how they deal with problems that are encountered. After this initial period of observation and possibly making small contributions to the community, the member may move from the periphery to the center.

Moving from the periphery to the center is often related to the apprenticeship model, where knowledge is transferred within a certain setting to the apprentice by the master. Lave and Wenger (1991) reject other knowledge transfer models that isolate knowledge from practice, where there is no meaning to the learning due to the setting being isolated from the practice. It is through their concept of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) that they see learning as an integral part of practice in the real world of work, rather than being situated where instances of practice are merely replicated. This is a view supported by Brown and Duguid (1991), where they say that

"abstractions detached from practice distort or obscure intricacies of that practice" (p. 40).

According to Gamble and Blackwell (2001), communities of practice are a collection of individuals who have formed an informal relationship concerned with a practice that is related to their work within a common context. It is through the practice that "a community of practice develops a shared understanding of what it does, of how to do it, and how it relates to other communities and their practices" (Brown & Duguid, 1998, p. 25). Another common characteristic that can be found in these communities is the regular interaction with other members and communities; these interactions can last for undetermined periods of time. Furthermore, within these communities, members come together voluntarily with the desire to learn and contribute. Unlike teams, these communities do not have to answer to managers or have to deliver certain outputs and be accountable to management; they exist outside of the formal structure of the organisation.

Management faces the challenge of having to try and manage communities of practice. Within these, the values that members tend to adhere to are based on reciprocity through the high level of trust formed, the expertise of members determining the influence they have, and the shared responsibilities with the community. Where the values of the organisation differ from the community, that is, the emphasis on formal roles, a challenge is posed in terms of the viability of communities of practice. This is most evident from Orr's (1990) ethnographic study of Xerox customer service representatives, in which management at first was hostile to the informal communities of practice that had evolved between the service representatives; in this case, management acted by abolishing the community. However, later, when it was realised that this had impacted productivity in a negative way, leading to inefficiencies, the decision was reversed, and the service representatives were allowed to meet. The case highlights how management needs to constrain itself from exercising too much control.

At the core of communities of practice are the people. They drive the evolution and development of the community in different ways. It is not always easy to identify communities of practice within organisations, but they have been in existence in some form or another for a considerable period of time, and it is not necessary for these groupings of people who share a common interest to be labeled as a community of practice formally. This is not to say that management need not support these communities, as vital resources and facilities can still be provided. What is essential, is that management actively tries to identify these informal communities that may exist outside of the formal structure in order to help cultivate them. It is vital that communities of practice offer something in terms of value to its members on a regular basis in order to retain them. Membership to these communities should be controlled by the members, not management. If management was to try and control the membership**,** it is likely that the core people would leave or not be as active. This is also a reason why communities of practice that are developed by management tend to fail, as they are not organised and defined by the members who are engaged and at the heart of the actual practice of the community. It is of utmost importance that the community is able to determine the degree of intensity and interaction that takes place. Management must recognise that communities of practice do not have a set life span; some communities of practice last longer than others. Management needs to play the pivotal role of facilitating a conducive environment where different communities that are formed within the organisation can come together (Gamble & Blackwell, 2001).

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE: MYTH, FAD, OR REALITY?

There have been many studies and investigations into the nature of organisational culture, resulting in various almost synonymous definitions (Brown & Duguid, 1998; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Handy, 1991; Hatch, 1993; Martin, 2002; Ott, 1989; Sathe, 1985; Schein, 1992). Residing at the cognitive level of the organisation's structure, there is consensus in the notion that those things that constitute organisational culture are shared or common. Schein (1992) defined culture as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to