

Organisational Change Elements of Establishing, Facilitating, and Supporting CoPs

P.A.C. Smith

The Leadership Alliance Inc., Canada

INTRODUCTION

Although knowledge management (KM) is often proposed as a viable means to enhance business performance by facilitating knowledge creation and sharing, there is serious concern that it frequently fails to deliver on its promise (Despres & Chauvel, 2000; Fuller, 2001; Newell, Scarbrough, Swan & Hislop, 1999; Pietersen, 2001; Brown & Duguid, 2000; Storey & Barnett, 2000).

Smith and McLaughlin (2003) posit that KM's lacklustre performance can often be traced to non-rational emotion-based "people-factors" that negatively influence interpersonal relationships, and that are ignored during typical KM implementation. These authors argue that the success of any significant change initiative, including KM, will be critically dependent on understanding, and improving as necessary, the collaborative characteristics of the organisation's culture.

This article adopts the notion that effective KM is largely people-centric, and that communities of practice (CoPs), *when suitably grounded*, provide a practical framework for assisting in the development of appropriate "people-factors" and the nurturing of collaborative relationships. It builds on the work of Smith and McLaughlin (2003) by proposing an extension of their approach that helps ensure the presence of a truly collaborative culture in the target community.

BACKGROUND

Smith and McLaughlin (2003) describe in detail a number of practical remedial initiatives, including establishing CoPs, that may be undertaken to help "get the people factors right" when trying to ensure successful KM implementation. These initiatives

are grounded in chaos theory and relate to three systemic "performance drivers":

1. **KM Focus:** A clear "who, what, where, when, and why" of the KM performance envisaged
2. **KM Resources:** The wherewithal to support KM Focus
3. **KM Will:** The intent to perform KM Focus

There are typically serious endemic barriers to optimising or even balancing these performance drivers. Four workforce development initiatives are recommended by Smith and McLaughlin (2003) to overcome these shortcomings:

1. community-wide collaborative development of a *Vision for the KM initiative* since this provides excellent Focus and Will for relationship-building through sharing of the individual yearnings of all employees;
2. management initiatives to address the physiological needs of individual employees (need for belongingness, esteem, and striving to be the best a person can be) based on Maslow's (1943) theory such that Will to form relationships is strengthened;
3. the nurturing of voluntary CoPs (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002) in order to promote formation of appropriate relationships based on conversations and activities of interdependent people in complex responsive processes (Stacey, 2001); and
4. introduction of CoP members and others to Action Learning methodology (Gaunt, 1991) as a means to:
 - enhance understanding of the "people-factors" that enhance or hinder relationship building, and provide participants with a process and the skills to further develop

- their learning and collaborative capabilities; and
- improve the way people meet (and form relationships) by helping them become sensitised to the semiconscious and unconscious impulses that operate as individuals and groups struggle to come together.

Recent KM literature reflects this emphasis on the people-centric nature of KM implementation, particularly where knowledge is tacit and not easily shared (Hildreth, Kimble & Wright, 2000). Comments by authorities such as Wiig (2000; p. 4) are typical:

There are emerging realisations that to achieve the level of effective behaviour required for competitive excellence, the whole person must be considered. We must integrate cognition, motivation, personal satisfaction, feelings of security, and many other factors.

Wiig (2000, p. 14) cites a number of authors to support his contention that “overall KM will become more people-centric because it is the networking of competent and collaborating people that makes successful organisations.” He goes on to say: “One key lesson to be learned is that we must adopt greater people-centric perspectives of knowledge...Technology only goes so far” (Wiig, 2000, p. 25).

Snowden (2000, pp. 237-238) notes that organisations:

...are gradually becoming aware that knowledge cannot be treated as an organisational asset without the active and voluntary participation of the communities that are its true owners. A shift to thinking of employees as volunteers requires a radical rethink of reward structures, organisational forms, and management attitudes.

Even where the KM focus is essentially technology based, the importance of people to the process is acknowledged. For example, Davenport and Prusak (1998, p. 129) wrote: “The roles of people in knowledge technologies are integral to their success.”

As noted in the Introduction, this article adopts the notion that successful KM is largely people-

centric, and that CoPs, *when appropriately grounded*, provide a practical framework for nurturing suitable relationships. Furthermore the article builds on the work of Smith and McLaughlin (2003) by proposing that there is a critical additional “fifth” development initiative that must be undertaken if a truly collaborative social fabric is to develop. This initiative involves the visualisation, optimisation, and utilisation of a variety of social networks across the organisation as the basis for establishing CoPs and other relevant groups (e.g., a KM Steering Committee). Issues that heighten the need for this initiative are presented in the next section. Identification of, and assessment of the influence of, the organisation’s formal and informal opinion leaders is included in the initiative, as are efforts to involve them at all stages of KM design and implementation. The fifth initiative is based on Social Network Analysis (Wasserman & Faust, 1997), which is also described.

ISSUES CONCERNING CoP AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

As discussed above, success in the new knowledge economy, for a public or private organisation, is critically dependent on having an organisational culture that is characterised by ready and effective communications across voluntary collaborative partnership-networks of all kinds. It is no longer “*what you know*” or even “*who you know*” that leads to viability and well-being; it is “*who you know well enough to trust for advice, or have confidence in to get things done efficiently and effectively.*” In other words, the extent to which formal and informal conversations, storytelling, and interactions of all kinds can take place across stakeholder communities will be critical to learning and the widespread sharing/generation of knowledge (Stacey, 2001). The concept of *social capital* (SC) (Coleman, 1990; Burt, 1992; Putnam, 1993) is useful for representing the collaborative status of relationships across an organisation. Although there is no uniformly accepted definition of SC, its meaning in an organisational setting has been captured by Gabbay and Leenders (1999, p. 3): “The set of resources, tangible or virtual, that accrue to a corporate player through the player’s social relationships, facilitating the attainment of goals.”

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