



## **Chapter VII**

# **Communities of Practice in the Royal National Lifeboat Institution**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter concentrates on Communities of Practice (CoPs) in the volunteer organization Royal National Lifeboat Institution. It argues that overlapping CoPs throughout the organization are needed to deal with a variety of unstructured practices at sea. In addition, altruism and trust are vital elements for sharing and creating knowledge among volunteers in the organization. The author hopes this chapter will provide a practical understanding of CoPs. The author hopes the discussion of a volunteer organization will bring some new insights into the concept of CoPs.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Communities of Practice (CoPs) have gained increased attention over the last few years. Both academics and practitioners have become more appreciative of the "...groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area

by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). However, most research has concentrated on commercial organizations. This chapter looks at CoPs within a volunteer organization, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI).

The RNLI was established in 1824 and provides a lifeboat service for the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Around the coasts are more than 230 lifeboat stations, whose lifeboats launch more than 6,000 times a year and rescue over 6,300 people. They are manned by largely volunteer crews (approximately 4,500) and every penny required to maintain the lifeboat service is raised from voluntary contributions.

Apart from the lifeboat stations, the RNLI has a large headquarters in Poole, England and six divisions around the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland where managers work.

This chapter focuses, first and foremost, on the work of operational volunteers in the RNLI, i.e., actually saving people at sea. The RNLI also has many thousands of other volunteers in areas like fundraising, public relations and water safety. The operational volunteers must be able to make decisions on their feet, often under extreme conditions. Especially during unforeseen and abnormal rescue operations, they must trust each other and rely on their intuition to get the job done. These rescue operations are extremely difficult to formalise since they often involve a variety of unstructured practices.

## UNSTRUCTURED PRACTICES

In organizations, there is quite a difference between job descriptions and actual work (Brown & Duguid, 1998). Instead of going to inadequate manuals and documents, people communicate, share their knowledge and experiences and get the task at hand done. Most organizations today are complex, where formal mechanisms cannot keep up with the variety of unstructured practices.

In the RNLI, it is impossible for managers to create formal processes for volunteers that incorporate all the variety that happens during rescue operations. The following example underlines this. A rescue operation was video-recorded where a boat with three people was trapped next to a ferry. Two lifeboats worked together to solve the situation. However, the trapped boat suddenly sank and a woman was dragged under the ferry. One man was held by the collar just above the water by a volunteer. If the volunteer had let go, the person would have followed the woman under the ferry. The third man was next to one of the lifeboats, barely conscious and unable to get out of the water. In this situation, the lives of these people were in the hands of the volunteers. Due to teamwork and being capable of dealing with an abnormal and unforeseen situation, the volunteers were eventually able to save all three.

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