

Chapter 84

Online Leadership and Learning: How Online Leaders May Learn From Their Working Experience

Ditte Kolbaek

Aalborg University, Denmark

ABSTRACT

Online working environments develop and change continuously, meaning that online leaders and online team members must learn to adapt to change and should utilize emerging possibilities for doing their jobs. The purpose of this chapter is to explore how online leaders learn from experiences developed by and with online teams; the chapter also provides a metaphor by which online leaders' learning is likened to a spiral. The theoretical foundation rests in activity theory and proactive review. The methodological approach involves a case study and netnography, the latter of which is utilized for researching phenomena that occur in the interaction between humans and information and communication technology. Data were gathered online from an online team in a global IT company classified as big business. The following research question was addressed: How do online leaders learn from experiences generated by their online teams by utilizing proactive review as a practice of learning?

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technology (ICT) is developing rapidly, and thus employees at all levels in organizations must be able to adapt, meaning that they ought to learn accordingly. Ongoing ICT development requires continuous learning in contemporary organizations. In other words, learning is as constant as breathing for organizations. The means and efficiency of organizational learning are dependent on the mindset and skills of the employees and leaders; furthermore, ICT has enabled organizations to create working environments in which employees work in geographically dispersed teams (Hinds & Mortensen, 2002; Schramm & Diederichsen, 2011). These employees rarely or never meet face to face,

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hence communication and cooperation are mediated by ICT, which may cause problems in aligning work processes, cooperation, and communication. None of these are constant, quite the opposite—they develop and change in accordance with concomitant developments in the technology (Flyverbom, 2012; Hinds & Mortensen, 2002; Schramm & Diederichsen, 2011). Continuous changes in the technology influence ways of leading and ways of participating in team work. The aim of this chapter is to provide an understanding of how online leaders learn from work experiences given that they rarely or never meet face to face with peers, team members, or superiors; rather, leadership and cooperation is mediated by ICT. The research question addressed in this chapter is as follows: *How do online leaders learn from experiences generated by their online teams by utilizing Proactive Review as practice of learning?*

Thus, this chapter explores how online leaders learn from experiences developed by and with online teams. The theoretical foundation lies in activity theory, developed by Engeström (2001, 2007), and Proactive Review (PR), which is a practice of learning from experience in the context of work (Kolbaek, 2011, 2014). Online teams may be described as “Interdependent groups of individuals that work across time, space, and organizational boundaries with communication links that are heavily dependent upon advanced information technologies” (Hambley, O’Neill, & Kline, 2007, p. 1). An online leader may be described as the member of a team who is responsible for setting agendas, moderating interactions, keeping the team on track, and influencing all of its members by interacting online (Huffaker, 2010).

Learning in the context of work can be perceived as mental constructions that may be developed into practices “where knowing how to go on and how to innovate the way of doing are produced, diffused, and kept” (Gherardi, 2015, p. 14). Hence, practices develop continuously, and practitioners must learn accordingly. Practitioners negotiate the practices, and sometimes a practice changes because of contradictions or even conflicts between the practitioners; other times, the practitioners change the practice in harmony. When the latter is the case, the practice is roughly constant; but when modifications are caused by changes outside the practitioners’ control, negotiations about new practices may include discrepancies and exude frustration, and the practices may be consequently unstable until the practitioners agree on new ways of doing (Engeström, 2001; Gherardi, 2015). A case study and netnography comprised the methodological approach used for online data gathering and includes observations from a web conference with a chat forum combined with a phone meeting and e-mail interview with the leader. The analysis led to the development of a new model to understand how online leaders learn from their teams and superiors. This chapter is a revised, re-written and extended version of a Danish chapter “Proactive Review som læringsrum for online-ledere” (Kolbaek, 2017).

BACKGROUND

In order to develop an understanding of how online leaders learn from work experience, the chapter presents a case from a global IT company classified as big business with 25,000 employees throughout EMEA (Europe, the Middle East, and Africa) (Kolbaek, 2014). The company sold hardware, software, and middleware to market leaders in most industries, and it only sold business to business. The company grew through mergers and acquisitions (Kolbaek, 2014), and one of the acquired companies provided a promising product, here named KK. A Top manager Weber was assigned the task of growing this product and its market share by 100% while keeping the contribution margin the same during the fiscal year. This requirement was outside the control of Weber and his team, and they needed negotiating new practices in order to succeed. Weber was aware that this was a learning process for himself and his

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