Chapter 5
Unraveling Power Dynamics in Communities of Practice

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ABSTRACT

This chapter concentrates on the question how does power dynamics relate to the development of Communities of Practice within the organizational context of European public-private Megaprojects. The notion of power seems to be one of the underdeveloped fields in current CoP theory (Veenswijk & Chisalita, 2007). After a theoretical evaluation of the CoP concept, a Dutch Community of Practice case 'Partners in Business' is presented. In this community, actors of four leading Dutch construction firms and the Ministry of Public Works participate in an informal and unofficial setting. This community was established in 2005 and is still active as innovative platform in the infrastructural field. The researchers act as catalyst and project reflector during the different stages of community building. After presentation and analysis of the case, we discuss the results of the case study while reflecting back on the theory, and we illustrate the advantages of considering the blind spots relating to power dynamics in CoP theory.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we explore the role of power dynamics in the development of Communities of Practice (CoP). Although the process of community building has been described extensively in current CoP literature, power dynamics seem to be an underdeveloped field in CoP theory (Contu & Wilmott, 2003; Veenswijk & Chisalita, 2007). We have chosen to explore this topic in the context of innovative projects (so-called Megaprojects) as research shows a strong connection between CoPs and innovative contexts (e.g. Hislop, 2003). Megaprojects refer to large-scale construction building interventions planned at the institutional (public sector) level (for example the construction

of a High Speed Train rail). However, the lack of success of these interventions have pushed towards alternative types of interventions in which the construction sector itself (private construction companies) is made responsible for improvements through a process of community building. Therefore, Megaprojects offer a rich context in which public and private sector come together (despite their differences), develop a CoP and works towards innovative solutions.

After a theoretical evaluation of the CoP concept, a Dutch community of practice case 'Partners in Business' is presented. In this community actors of four leading Dutch construction firms and the Department of Public Works and Water Management participate in an informal and unofficial setting. This community was established in 2005 and is active as innovative platform in the infrastructural field. The researchers act as catalysts and project reflectors during the different stages of community building (Wenger, 2000). After the presentation and analysis of the case we discuss the results of the case study, we reflect back on the theory and we illustrate the advantages of considering the blind spots in CoP theory.

Background of the CoP Concept

The notion of CoPs is eclectic in the sense that it connects a functional perspective on social relations, culture, and identity to an interpretive view that takes the subjective (and dynamic) construction of meaning for granted. These dual roots also emerge in normative discussions surrounding the use of communities of practice in processes of organizational change (see also Veenswijk & Chisalita, 2007). The notion of community as a connecting entity for organizational practice is widespread in theories of culture, identity, and knowledge accumulation. In recent years, many studies have been conducted on culture as an integrating force and as a fundament of organizational communities in which (various kinds of) knowledge is developed and learning processes are

organized (Martin, 2002). Following the American bestsellers by Senge (1994) and Argyris and Schon (1996) organizational theorists have worked out this approach and have applied it to a wide range of organizational learning and change projects. In addition to their capacity for iterative learning, Lave and Wenger (1991) identify three main aspects that characterize communities of practice: meaning, identity and practice.

Meaning refers to the fact that community experiences and learning processes are linked to the praxis and sense-making processes of community members. Objects and events are useful to community actors only if they can ascribe meaning to them and can place them within their own frames of reference. Webs of significance impart a certain order to reality, and this system subsequently achieves certain legitimacy. Sense-making can be described as the number of assumptions concerning reality that are held by an actor and valued in a certain way (Veenswijk, 2001: 55).

Identity is essential to understanding the evolution of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). By creating their own discourses (i.e. languages with specific symbols, rituals, and codes) communities are able to operate as recognizable entities within a program of change. Parker (2000) states that identity can be differentiated in terms of "higher and lower" order constellations. Alternative definitions of reality can develop within the various constellations of discourses that may compete with each other. As a result, the situation determines the definition of reality that the actors use when communicating. In patterns of continuous interaction each actor is constantly included in more than one social context. These other contexts are always in the background. An actor can bring definitions of reality that have been developed in a certain configuration into other configurations of which he is a part. The construction and reconstruction of realities are influenced by the inclusion of actors in multiple configurations. The concept of multiple identification can also be found in Tajfel's (1981)

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