

# Leading Learning Communities with Creative Practice

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## INTRODUCTION

*And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom. – Anais Nin*

Leaders in all fields including education benefit through the application of creative strategies while simultaneously building strong learning communities. In a global society, virtual learning teams are essential for connecting human capital at all levels. A variety of learning community models supported by creative leadership is necessary to meet diverse demands to today's society. Key literature relating to the models of creative leadership, transformative leadership, and communities of practice is synthesized; practical models are then shared to provide real world applications and narratives of reflective practice and creative expression. Reflective narratives focus on leadership theories that support personal growth, caring, interpersonal communication, problem solving and creativity, (Bass, 2008; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Goethals, Sorenson, & MacGregor Burns, 2004; & Noddings, 1992). Communities of practice (CoPs) are a type of learning community made up of "groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise" (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p. 139). The authors describe how creative leaders can use CoPs as a mechanism to share and build knowledge, solve problems, and foster professional growth and development.

## BACKGROUND

### Leadership and Communities of Practice

*When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves. – Viktor Frankl*

In today's global information society knowledge is an asset that needs to be managed strategically (Wenger, 2009). Increasingly, creative leaders are using the Communities of Practice (CoPs) approach

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to learning as a knowledge management tool. According to Kislov, Harvey and Walshe (2011) CoPs can be used to analyze and facilitate knowledge sharing in a wide range of organizational settings, including, business, education, information technology and healthcare organizations.

### **Carla's Connection Dilemma**

Carla is the Director of Professional Development in a large, geographically dispersed school district. The district recently implemented a grant-funded program to pilot a digital science curriculum using tablet computers in 20 third grade classrooms. The grant was awarded under the premise that the school district would establish a professional learning community to engage the participating teachers in ongoing collaboration, share ideas about best practices, and address challenges that arise from the use of the new digital tools. Participating teachers have such diverse schedules that they can only commit to one face-to-face meeting per semester. Carla is concerned that waiting so long to connect may result in the teachers' forgetting to share information that may be critical to the success of the program. Faced with this dilemma, she reviews several articles on current trends in workplace learning which address how to build knowledge sharing communities among key human resources set apart by distance.

### **Using Communities of Practice as a Knowledge Management Tool**

Communities of practice come in a variety of forms including traditional, organizational, and virtual CoPs (Kirkman, Cordery, Mathieu, Rosen, & Kukenberger, 2013). Traditional CoPs, as defined by Wenger (2009) as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, 2009, p. 1). These groups may be formal or informal and are made up of three components:

1. A domain,
2. A community, and
3. A practice.

The domain refers to the common interests that bring the CoP together (Wenger, 2009). According to Swift (2014), "The central feature of a CoP is the relationship that develops between the members, enabling learning to take place within a culture of support, trust, and mutual understanding (p. 28).

Creative leaders can also use communities of practice as a knowledge management tool. Organizational CoPs (OCoPs) were described by Kirkman et al. (2013) as "more formalized, purposeful, and bounded forms of CoPs" (p. 333). OCoPs can exist within a business unit, stretch across divisional boundaries, or even thrive with members from different companies (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Moreover, when geographic distance impedes participation, online, or virtual CoPs (VCoPs) can be formed (Kirkman et al., 2013).

Now more than ever leaders need creative ways to facilitate Communities of Practice (CoPs), as the world has become one large distributed network of information. To be informed and knowledgeable, the educator of tomorrow must serve as a knowledge broker and operate as a part of a larger consortium of learners to cope with the amount of information that will be available (Bryan & Musgrove, 2003).

As Thomas Friedman (2005) author of *The World is Flat*, which includes a brief history of the twenty-first century, wrote:

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