



Chapter XIV

Building Sustainable Communities of Practice

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ABSTRACT

The authors have both been involved as designers, producers and facilitators of CPsquare's Foundations of Communities of Practice Workshop (www.cpsquare.com). Through that ongoing exposure to learning and leading in Communities of Practice (CoPs), they became convinced that stories about CoPs play a crucial role in motivation and learning for community leaders. Within communities, the swapping of stories is a means by which local theories of cause and effect are developed and contextualized. These stories provide powerful ways of invoking context, of framing choices and actions and of constructing identity (Bruner, 2002). From the context of a Community of Practice (CoP) concerned with the cultivation of CoPs, (i.e., the Foundations workshop) there is strong anecdotal evidence that stories are of equal value to practitioners and researchers alike. As part of an extended research activity, and parallel to this growing conviction about stories, Stuckey analysed the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) raised over six iterations of the workshop. The ten most frequently asked questions became the basis of semi-structured interviews held with the

developers and managers of the communities described in this chapter. The chapter presents the essence of seven community cases and is intended as an enticement to explore the full case descriptions and community stories (which are beyond the limitations of this printed publication) at <http://www.cpsquare.org/cases/>.

INTRODUCTION

Is it a community or not? This is a very common question and often quite a valid one. The reporting of this series of case studies was guided by a question posed by Etienne Wenger (2002) in response to the Community versus Network debate, “Will the group benefit by being viewed as a community?” Each of our cases reinforces the notion that one’s view on this matter depends significantly on one’s role or place in a community. People near the core of a community experience the community features more readily, while people on the periphery may see only a looser network. Our respondents, who all were close to the core of the communities, would answer Wenger’s question with a resounding “Yes”, for they all have envisioned their groups as communities and that vision in turn drives the opportunities for the group.

This chapter gives a taste of some of the energy, vision and effort it takes to build effective CoPs. The cases selected vary across geographical, technological and sectoral dimensions in the hope that you will find useful insights for your own community development efforts, whether inside organizations or across organizations, in educational, government or business settings. Each case is exemplary in its field and renders insights into the intricacy and complexity of issues that arise in building communities. Each of the interviewees was not only a leader in their community but also a highly respected practitioner in their domain. The goal in this chapter is to present the community, the leader, and the community’s situation in an authentic and accessible way.

The focus of this chapter is on the topic most frequently of interest to novice community leaders and designers: building a community. This building phase can be mapped directly against the stages of CoPs proposed by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002, pp. 68-69). The building phase of community covers the Wenger et al.’s stages of potential, and coalesces through to mature where the sense of group, individual agency and the dynamic of the community are being built.

The importance of CoPs and their generative capacity has been argued extensively (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002; Williams & Cothrel, 2000; Davenport & Hall, 2002) and elsewhere in chapters of this book. How to cultivate communities has also received extensive study, and whether you subscribe to the explicit design principles in The 5Ps of Joseph Cothrel (2001), The 9 Design Strategies of Amy Jo Kim (2000, pp. xiii-xiv), or the 7 Design

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