



## **Chapter XX**

# **Trusting the Knowledge of Large Online Communities: Strategies for Leading from Behind**

John S. Storck  
Boston University School of Management, USA

Lauren E. Storck  
Boston University, USA

### **ABSTRACT**

*The phrase “leading from behind” is borrowed from group analytic theory, an important branch of group psychology. For some, the phrase may be pejorative: an effective leader is normally in front of group members, not taking a position behind them. However, for large online Communities of Practice, leading from behind and trusting the group is an important strategy. This chapter focuses on how a leader develops the capacity to trust the group. Recognizing that groups of people are powerful and creative organisms that can be trusted is difficult for a leader. For Freud, who thought of groups as unthinking, primitive mobs and for modern managers, who are taught the value of using teams with specific objectives and limited life spans, the idea of unstructured, dispersed collections of people making decisions or taking action is an anathema. Learning to trust the knowledge of a large group takes training, practice and courage. We*

*ground our conclusions in an empirical analysis of the leadership of one large online Community of Practice. Using archives of discussions among community members, we develop leadership principles that support the “leading from behind” approach. We use these data to suggest how managers can lead online communities to form the trusting relationships that are essential for effective knowledge sharing and innovation.*

## LEADERSHIP AND TRUST IN DISPERSED COMMUNITIES

*“The leader ... is perhaps the most important variable determining the prevailing culture and tradition of the group. He must in turn use his ability in the best interest of the group; he is its first servant. He must follow the group ...” (Foulkes, 1975, p. 5).*

Much research has dealt with how group members come to trust leaders and other members of a group (Atwater, 1988; Avolio, Kahai & Dodge, 2001; Iacono & Weisband, 1997; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998; Meyerson, Weick & Kramer, 1996). In this chapter, we focus on a relatively unstudied pathway of trust: how the leader of a successful large online professional community develops trust in the group itself. We argue that this focus helps trained leaders harness the power of large dispersed Communities of Practice (CoPs). Our objective is to present a new approach for understanding and applying effective leadership principles to large groups by “leading from behind”. If a leader can develop the capacity to trust a group as an entity and trust the group process, we suggest that s/he will be better prepared for the demanding roles required more and more frequently by large, distributed organizations.

The concept of trust is multifaceted, even within the domain of individual behaviors. Different definitions of trust (commonly: A trusts B to do X) refer to levels of confidence, predictability, uncertainty and vulnerability. From an organizational perspective, trust is an important ingredient in the creation of social capital, which is considered by many to be a measure of community development (Bordieu, 1977, 1983; Constant, Sproull & Kiesler, 1996; Putnam, 2000). The relationship between trust and leadership has particular relevance for dispersed communities, yet this relationship has received relatively little attention aside from a more general interest in the concept of trust and its multiple implications for life in the 21st century (Cook, 2001).

Although trust or trustworthiness is often listed as a quality that good leaders exhibit, the concept is far from an easy one to grasp (Bennis, 1989; Dubrin, 2001; Huxham & Vangen, 2000). It is dependent on some form of reliability or constancy and is often discussed in combination with other traits such as honesty, sincerity, vision and virtue.

11 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: [www.igi-global.com/chapter/trusting-knowledge-large-online-communities/25437](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/trusting-knowledge-large-online-communities/25437)

## Related Content

---

### Strategic Knowledge Management in Public Organizations

Ari-Veikko Anttiroiko (2008). *Knowledge Management: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications* (pp. 2159-2167).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/strategic-knowledge-management-public-organizations/25249](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/strategic-knowledge-management-public-organizations/25249)

### Why Do Lessons Learned Often Fail?: An Analysis of Experiences

Ian Fry (2021). *Handbook of Research on Organizational Culture Strategies for Effective Knowledge Management and Performance* (pp. 176-193).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/why-do-lessons-learned-often-fail/286314](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/why-do-lessons-learned-often-fail/286314)

### Building Sustainable Communities of Practice

Bronwyn Stuckey and John D. Smith (2004). *Knowledge Networks: Innovation Through Communities of Practice* (pp. 150-164).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/building-sustainable-communities-practice/25431](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/building-sustainable-communities-practice/25431)

### Detection and Prevention of Twitter Users with Suicidal Self-Harm Behavior

Hadj Ahmed Bouarara (2020). *International Journal of Knowledge-Based Organizations* (pp. 49-61).

[www.irma-international.org/article/detection-and-prevention-of-twitter-users-with-suicidal-self-harm-behavior/241875](http://www.irma-international.org/article/detection-and-prevention-of-twitter-users-with-suicidal-self-harm-behavior/241875)

### Knowledge Sharing: Effects of Cooperative Type and Reciprocity Level

Jaekyung Kim, Sang M. Lee and David L. Olson (2006). *International Journal of Knowledge Management* (pp. 1-16).

[www.irma-international.org/article/knowledge-sharing-effects-cooperative-type/2688](http://www.irma-international.org/article/knowledge-sharing-effects-cooperative-type/2688)