Chapter 7
Samson and Delilah as a Discourse of Communities of Practice

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ABSTRACT

The chapter proposes that emerging management strategies that prescribe and try to measure the activities of a community of practice (CoP) may have unexpected and negative outcomes, at least for organizations. The chapter suggests that voluntary participation in CoPs may cease or knowledge transfer may be minimized rather than optimized, as knowledge practitioners rebel against the command and control strategies of management. This may severely impinge on the viability and sustainability of CoPs as a means of 'situated learning' theorized by Lave & Wenger (1991) and knowledge sharing expressed by Brown & Duguid (1991; 1998).

The chapter conceptualizes that an impasse may arise between management and knowledge practitioners in divulging the quantity and quality of knowledge made available for organizational use. Rather than facilitating the flow of information from knowledge practitioners to the organization, CoPs may become another conflicted terrain of unequal power relationships. While laying out these possibilities, the chapter also suggests that there could be a different outcome, one that rebalances the pendulum of power relationships for the mutual benefit and interests of both management and knowledge practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

The chapter engages with a prevailing managerial notion that organization knowledge is the successful result of transferring knowledge from the minds and practices of knowledge practitioners to the organization, which, in turn, only requires establishment of communities of practice (CoPs). One such cohort of management and organizational scholars argues that implementation of CoPs has resolved the debates about whether knowledge practitioners are willing to share their knowledge (Brown & Duguid, 1991, 1998; Davenport & Hall, 2002; Horibe, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991; van Baalen *et al*, 2005; Wenger, 1998). CoPs provide the socialized spheres that encourage knowledge sharing within organizational contexts. Such discourses dominate management and organizational literature, and have become widely accepted as *de rigueur* organizational practice by management and business consultants (such as global consultants Accenture, Gartner Group, International Data Corporation, Meta Group, and more).

Other theorists suggest that in idealizing such organizational practices as CoPs, three problems are illuminated. The first problem is that knowledge practitioners – or knowledge workers as they are also known – may be unwilling to share their knowledge (Davenport *et al*, 1998; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004; Scarbrough, 1999). The second is that knowledge sharing may be contested and conflicted, and traversed by discourses of power (Adelstein, 2007; Clegg & Palmer, 1996; Deetz 1994; Garrick & Clegg, 2000). Indeed, resistance may be such that knowledge workers may actively work against a management-desired smooth transition of knowledge from themselves to the organization in order to protect their roles within the organization and balance the position of power between management and knowledge practitioners (Adelstein & Clegg, 2011; Clegg, 1997; Orr, 1991; Scarbrough, 1999).

A third problem is that the extent of success of CoPs in their present form is uncertain because such success cannot be predicted or measured. Herein lay the twin problems for management: first, are CoPs productive in relation to how much knowledge is being transferred; and, second, how can the quality of that knowledge for organizational innovation be assessed? In recognition of these problems, management is beginning to impose stringent measurement schemata on CoP interactions (Kaplan & Norton, 2007; Wiig, 1999a) to create a "technologified" view of knowledge. This view extends far beyond the traditional knowledge management strategies of capturing explicit knowledge to make it organizationally accessible, and shifts towards the capture and measurement of implicit knowledge described by Polanyi (1962) as hidden in the heads of the 'knowers'. At the same time, the problems of an imposed regime of power and its contestation, which are implicated in such management schemata for knowledge transfer, are denied.

Through subtle shifts in the discourses of communities of practice and organizational knowledge, CoPs have emerged as a salve for knowledge-based organizational strategies. The theory presents us with a view that management has secured, or at least begun to secure, the knowledge territory: an organization can access what employees know by applying technologies of knowledge management to CoPs. Although the application of technologies to the intangibility of CoPs may be seen as successful in terms of their management by organizations, this view is under researched in terms of the viability and sustainability of CoPs occasioned by management/practitioner power relations, and has yet to be developed in any meaningful way in the literature. The chapter proposes to theorize the problematics of securing the CoP territory within a management/knowledge practitioner power relationship.

The view may be problematized as a pincer movement involving two sequences. First, the pivotal position of knowledge practitioners in the discourses of organizational knowledge is being marginalized; and second, that tools of produc-

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