

Chapter 5.8

Leadership Challenges in Communities of Practice: Supporting Facilitators Via Design and Technology

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ABSTRACT

Organizations have the potential to achieve advantage through communities of practice (COPs) initiatives. However, establishing and sustaining COPs is a challenging task. Facilitation is needed to help COPs overcome difficulties throughout their life stages. Facilitators take on leadership roles within these virtual communities, yet little is known about the challenges related to their roles. This paper contributes in helping to improve leadership in COP by highlighting challenges in facilitating COP and by providing potential solutions addressing those challenges. A recent survey of facilitators reveals challenges faced by

facilitators in performing their tasks within COPs. The issue of participation was identified as the main concern in COP facilitation. Several design and technology initiatives are discussed for their potential to help facilitators in coping with the participation issue and providing essential leadership roles within communities of practice.

INTRODUCTION

Communities of practice (COPs) have become an important part of an organization and are increasingly recognized as valuable organizational assets (Lesser & Storck, 2001). COPs have been

identified as playing a critical role in the promotion of learning and innovation in contemporary organizations (Swan, Scarborough, & Robertson, 2002). However, establishing and sustaining COPs in organizations is a challenging endeavor and COPs are likely to face various challenges and/or difficulties throughout their life-cycle (Tarmizi & de Vreede, 2005). The introduction of a facilitator is believed to be one way to promote a sustainable COP, since a facilitator can play a crucial role in addressing the challenges of establishing and nurturing a COP (Fontaine, 2001; Kimball & Ladd, 2004). In general, facilitation can be defined as “making things easier by using a range of skills and methods to bring the best out in people as they work to achieve results in interactive events” (Townsend & Donovan, 1999, p. 2). The facilitator role entails a wide variety of behaviors, including leadership behaviors (Schwartz, 2002; Schwarz, Davidson, Carlson & McKinney, 2005; Schuman, 2005). The concept of leadership has been viewed in many ways over its history, including in terms of leader characteristics or traits, leader behaviors, typologies, sources of power or influence, and situational contingencies (Bass, 1990). In virtual environments, leadership is an especially interesting phenomenon because of the distributed nature of the context in which leadership must be exercised (Avolio, Kahai, & Dodge, 2001). Traditional forms of exercising leadership are changed in virtual environments, where the usual face-to-face influence is not possible. Thus, it may be that COP members look to a facilitator to exercise leadership to a greater extent than in other kinds of virtual entities because COPs typically do not have an assigned leader.

Although the concept of facilitation has been acknowledged to be applicable to communities of practice (Johnson, 2001), the role of the facilitator in COPs is still under-researched, in contrast to research on facilitation in other fields. Facilitation has been extensively studied and documented in the field of Group Support Systems (GSS) (e.g., Romano, Nunamaker, Briggs, & Mittle-

man, 1999; Dickson, Limayem, Lee-Partridge, & DeSanctis, 1996; Clawson & Bostrom, 1996; Niederman, Beise, & Beranek, 1996; Griffith, Fuller, & Northcraft, 1998; De Vreede, Boonstra, & Niederman, 2002). COPs could draw benefit from those extensive studies, although there are differences in the nature of COPs and GSSs that should be taken into consideration. Based on the GSS literature, Tarmizi and de Vreede (2005) proposed a facilitation-task taxonomy for COPs. This taxonomy took into consideration key differences between facilitation in COP environments and in GSS-supported meetings. Furthermore, the taxonomy included several tasks that reflect leader behaviors within groups, such as providing information, encouraging group members, keeping the group focused, and managing conflict. Yet this taxonomy does not explicitly address the challenges that facilitators experience in executing the various tasks that are part of their COP facilitation duties. While knowing what tasks a COP facilitator has to undertake helps to prepare for this responsibility, having insight into the relative difficulty and importance of the various facilitation tasks would improve the facilitator’s preparation. This in turn could help a facilitator to consciously allocate available cognitive resources more efficiently. For example, attention is a scarce resource and a facilitator could be helped to focus more on important yet difficult tasks, while focusing less on difficult yet unimportant tasks. Finally, this knowledge would inform training efforts for novice COP facilitators. Therefore the goal of the study reported in this paper is to answer the following two research questions:

- What are the most challenging facilitation tasks in COPs?
- How can facilitators be supported in addressing the most important challenges?

To address the first question, we conducted a survey of professional COP facilitators to determine their perceptions of the relative difficulty

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