

CONFERENCE PAPER / WORKSHOP PROPOSAL

COMMUNITY, COLLABORATION, AND CHANGE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE IN PRACTICE

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Paper and Rationale

This is a combination of a research paper on and case study of various aspects of Communities of Practice: formation, operation and sustainment, leadership and leadership development, collaboration, and learning and change. See abstract below.

The topic, in general, and the findings of the research this paper presents, in particular, should be of great interest to MOPAN participants. Communities of Practice can play a strategic role in fostering creativity and innovation. They have, for instance, been effective instruments of change at The Australian National University. This paper provides invaluable insight into collaborative efforts within and across organisations, especially with respect to collegial and distributive leadership. Moreover, the author's experience working in and with Communities of Practice, and, in particular, designing and running the *Practice in Leadership Workshop* discussed in the paper and in the abstract, below, could bring a remarkable interactive element to the conference. That is, we could build one or more communities during the conference.

Key Words

- Community ■ Leadership
- Collaboration ■ Change

Conference Themes

The proposed paper / workshop cuts across conference themes. It could easily fall into themes 1 (informal organising), 2 (leadership in collaboration), or 5 (social technologies for innovation).

ABSTRACT

This paper presents preliminary findings of a two-year research project investigating the potential of Communities of Practice to develop individual and corporate leadership capacity. Ending a first phase in late 2007, the project has been extended and expanded for another two years based on very positive and, in many ways, unexpected results. Much of value has been learnt about group dynamics and development, particularly in the areas of collaboration and leadership. We are still attempting to understand, apply, and get the most out of what we are discovering in terms of community-building, practice improvement, and task-accomplishment; and individual / collective agency, learning, and change. Amongst the

more-intriguing findings are the processes of (1) leading for leadership development, (2) how individuals come to see themselves as leaders within the community context, and (3) how distributive leadership actually works in practice.

The project entailed establishing and supporting a variety of Communities of Practice across a research-intensive University in Australia, including COPs for sustainability, Research-Led Education, Indigenous Affairs, and tutors / teaching assistants. Facilitation and administrative support for each COP was provided by one or more project team member who documented the experiences, achievements, and progress of the respective COPs. While some COPs experienced dramatic success, others struggled. Observing these communities enabled development of Critical Success Factors for Communities of Practice and a diagnostic instrument to assess operational effectiveness. Community of Practice evolution was also mapped, along with the kind of external facilitation most appropriate for each stage of development.

The project team, itself, was run as a Community of Practice. This enabled on-going consideration of the differences between a team and a Community of Practice, and provided a “test bed” for trialling interventions intended to resolve on-going problems in the different COPs. Ultimately, active and interested members from each of the Communities of Practice formed a SuperCOP, a “super-community” that served as a support group and a learning laboratory. Participation in the SuperCOP was found to be extremely useful in promoting leadership skills development that made these individuals more effective in working with and leading their respective COPs.

A national symposium on COPs was designed and conducted in 2007 based on what we had learnt to date, and incorporating tools and techniques we had experimented with. The two-day workshop “Practice in Leadership” was intended to immerse participants in a simulated, accelerated process of Community of Practice formation and operation. We wanted participants to experience and reflect upon the emergence of leadership and effective group process. Groups of ten were assigned to six Communities of Practice, each with its own self-determined purpose and self-managing process. While each COP operated differently and reported a wide range of experiences (including conflict and frustration) and lessons learnt, the workshop was judged by participants to be an extraordinary event with lasting impact. Suggesting the potential of Communities of Practice to promote change, a follow-up survey conducted three months after the workshop revealed that many participants have subsequently started COPs of their own or are endeavouring to do so.