

Learning Communities: Expanding the Boundaries of Learning- OHPE #182.1

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Introduction

This is the seventh in a series of articles that have appeared in the OHPE Bulletin in the last two years, written by Peter O'Donnell. In the first article in the series, Peter introduced a five-level developmental model of organizational health. Subsequent articles expanded on the initial overview, and elaborated each of the first four levels. In this article, Peter turns his attention to the final level of development - the nurturing of learning communities.

In his initial article, Peter described this 'highest' level of development as being critical to the long-term sustainability of any healthy organization because it broadens the base of support for ongoing learning and change. In essence, it involves establishing 'learning communities' that cut across organizational lines, engaging a widening circle of people committed to collective learning and action. Some organizational theorists call these 'communities of practice', and a growing body of research suggests that they have long been very influential in enabling system-wide change in many areas of human endeavor. Anthropologist Margaret Mead captures this well in her oft-quoted remark, 'Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world, indeed, it is the only thing that ever does.' We begin with a closer look into one such learning community.

by Peter O'Donnell of Innovaction [email: pcod@innovaction.com]

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A. Greenhouse - Growing Capacity for Change

We called ourselves 'Greenhouse.' Our group consisted of three consultants, five Executive Directors, and one who was both. We were nine individuals with a common purpose - to contribute to each other's learning, and increase our capacity to help organizations remain healthy in the midst of ongoing, turbulent change.

For three years we met infrequently, but always with a sense of eager anticipation, and usually without an agenda, but knowing that each of us would learn something from the encounter that would equip us to be more effective in our unique situations. Even today, several years after our last gathering, we continue to connect with each other, to contribute to each other's efforts to create healthy change and, as always, to learn.

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B. Look Around - They're Everywhere... And You're in Them!

Our story is not unique. In fact, most of our colleagues can describe similar experiences of being members of 'learning communities' which transcend organizational boundaries, and outlive positions, projects and even major career changes. Typically, such groups exist to foster the kind of learning that cannot be achieved within the 'formal', more limiting, structures of our organizations.

Etienne Wenger, in his work at the Institute for Research on Learning, a spin-off or Xerox's Palo Alto Research Laboratories, coined the term 'communities of practice' to describe these groups. Wenger's research provided strong support to the idea that most significant learning is social. As he studied how scientists learn, he made a number of surprising discoveries. However romantic the image of the scientist bent over his desk in a pool of lamplight might be, Wenger became convinced that the more likely setting was

around a table with a group of their colleagues, and not necessarily those with whom they were formally associated.

In a 1996 article, Fortune magazine summarized the contribution of these learning communities this way. [‘Communities of practice are the shop floor of human capital, the place where the stuff gets made.’](#) Brook Manville, director of knowledge management at McKinsey & Co., defines a community of practice thus: ‘a group of people who are informally bound to one another by exposure to a common class of problem.’

Given this broad definition, it’s clear that most of us belong to more than one, and not just on the job. At a given point in our lives, these might include everything from the most obvious, such as a management team, one or more project teams, or a committee planning a conference for a professional association. Some of these will function entirely inside our own organizations and some will span many organizations. But, we may also be involved in groups that support our learning in our church choir, a neighbourhood association, and our son or daughter’s soccer league. The common denominator is our desire to improve our results in key areas of our work and life through collaborative learning.

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C. Common Characteristics

Wenger points to several traits that define communities of practice. First, each has its own unique history - they develop, and change, over time, and members find a variety of ways to ‘keep the memory alive.’ In the case of the Greenhouse group, we initially came together to plan a pre-conference invitational workshop for leaders of non-profit organizations. The purpose of the workshop was two-fold: to expose key leaders in this sector to the best of current thinking in the field of organizational development, and to encourage networking among like-minded individuals and organizations. We planned a single follow-up meeting after the workshop to debrief the event. When we met, however, we soon began to imagine other ways to support each other’s efforts to a positive difference in our separate areas of work. As time went on, we often reflected back on important steps in our learning journey as a group.

Second, communities of practice have an enterprise but not an agenda. That is, they form around some sort of value-adding ‘something-we’re-all-doing’ - a sense of connection between each member’s individual work. It might be a work group that wants to be the best in their organization. On the other hand, it might be a loosely knit group of people who work apart but share a common mission, a support group formed around a particular personal or professional interest or need, or neighbours who regularly meet over coffee to share their latest insights or challenges.

The enterprise that focused our attention in the Greenhouse group was a common commitment to helping to transform the organizations that looked to us for leadership - the places we called ‘home’ organizationally speaking - to make them healthier and more supportive places for everyone who worked and learned in them.

A third trait identified by Wenger is that the enterprise involves unique pathways to learning. In fact, the process of learning becomes so important in itself that, over time, most communities of practice develop their own unique culture and customs. The main purpose of these is to reinforce the ‘special’ nature of the groups learning.

For the Greenhouse group, a unifying theme of our ongoing work was the ‘book’ we were writing together. Looking back, it’s clear that none of us really believed we would ever get produce that book. And yet, it was a useful metaphor for what we were doing together - we were distilling our emerging insights into practical, replicable nuggets of learning that each of us could ‘read’ about in the stories we shared. As we became better at telling our stories, it became easier to share these insights with others in ways that would facilitate their learning as well. Each of us continues to review what we wrote together, and to add new chapters - new stories, that build on our learning together.

Fourth, and perhaps most intriguing, communities of practice are responsible only to themselves. No one owns them. There's no boss. People join and stay because they have something to learn and to contribute, and because they receive from the generous contributions of others. The learning that occurs belongs to each, and to all, at the same time, and is meant to be freely shared, as opposed to the more proprietary constraints imposed within our organizations. In this sense, it is the ideal structure within which to do the work of creating the future, because it naturally integrates the needs of the group with the needs of its individual members, and it values learning above performance. If there is any 'competitive advantage' to be had, it is to be had by all.

One feature of the Greenhouse group that we all grew to appreciate more and more was the absence of any pre-set agenda, and the freedom that gave us to follow the learning wherever it was taking us. After the initial event that had served to bring us together, we quite deliberately avoided the usual trappings of formal meetings - agendas, a designated chair, etc. Instead, our only 'certainties' were our meeting time (a whole morning) and food (muffins and fresh coffee.) Our usual starting point was a simple question, 'What are you learning these days, and how is it helping you to make a difference?' Typically, the time passed more quickly than any of us realized and, at the end, we each left with innumerable insights to take back out to the 'real world.'

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D. Stages of Development

Etienne Wenger, in an article in the Systems Thinker journal (Vol. 9 #5, 1998), summarized the typical stages of development of communities of practice, and their relationships to the formal organizations with which they intersect.

First, is the 'Unrecognized' stage, which is perhaps the stage at which the community is safest from external interference. By definition, it is invisible to the organization and sometimes even to members themselves. Its main challenges are the lack of awareness of its value and its limitations, as well as a lack of reflexivity.

Next, is the 'Bootlegged' stage, where the community is only visible informally to a circle of people in the know. At this stage, members begin to make a more conscious investment in developing and supporting the group's efforts. Not surprisingly, though, the main challenges for 'bootlegged' communities of practice is getting resources and having an impact, while still staying 'hidden.'

The third stage is the 'Legitimate' stage, where the group becomes officially 'sanctioned' as a valuable entity. With this legitimacy, however, may come closer scrutiny, over-management, and external demands. These are potentially life threatening to a learning community because they are attempts to impose control from outside the group.

If the group survives, it next enters the 'Strategic' stage, where the community of practice may even achieve recognition as central to the organization's success. The threats to the group's health now become subtler - think of them as a kind of 'death by success.' For example, a common short-term pressures to 'produce' in some tangible way, thus detracting from the focus on learning. Other threats, however, come from within the group itself in the form of smugness, elitism or exclusion.

Getting past these threats requires a good deal of discipline in staying focused on the group's learning purpose. The reward will be to reach the 'Transformative' stage of development. At this level, the capacity of the group for 'generative' learning is such that it becomes capable of redefining its environment and the direction of the organizations represented within the group, perhaps even at a 'whole system' level. Still, there are predictable challenges, which include relating to formal structures, and non-members, of these same organizations. Along with this come ongoing threats around such issues as acceptance and boundary management.

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E. Pilot Groups - Learning that Makes a Difference

In the end, though, the bottom line of all this talk about learning communities is a very practical reality. Simply put, they are fundamental to creating healthy change.

In the previous article in this series, 'Enhancing Capacity for Learning: Enabling Growth - Creating Change', I summarized the findings of a recent major research project that looked at the relationship between organizational learning and change. One of the most interesting findings was that lasting change almost always seemed to come as a result of initially modest initiatives by small teams of individuals. Peter Senge, who led that research, called these 'pilot groups.'

Since publishing the initial findings of this research, Senge has increasingly focused attention on these pilot groups, and now confidently states that they are the ONLY means by which major change happens effectively. Among the hundreds of change initiatives studied, not a single example was found of successful large-scale change that was 'driven' from the top. The successful examples all 'emerged' as a by-product of the learning efforts of groups of committed people.

So, the challenge is clear - how can we make our organizations places that nurture the emergence of learning communities as both the means and ends of change? That's how we will learn our way into the future - together.

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O'Donnell, Peter "Enhancing Capacity for Learning: Enabling Growth, Creating Change" OHPE Bulletin #107.1, May 28, 1999 also online at http://www.innovaction.com/resources/learning_org/index.html with all six previous articles outlining the Overview of the Organizational Change Model and the Five Stages.

Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of Practice: Learning as a Social System, The Systems Thinker, Vol. 9, No. 5, June/July 1998. Pegasus Communications Inc., Waltham, MA, USA

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Webber, Alan "Learning for a Change" [Interview with Peter Senge on pilot groups and learning communities] in Fast Company issue 24, page 178 May 1999 see also <http://pf.fastcompany.com/online/24/senge.html>