

■ Research Article

The Rise and Fall of a Community of practice: A Descriptive Case Study

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For more than a decade, the notion of communities of practice has drawn attention from both scholars and practitioners. Its popularity has been fuelled, in part, by the realisation that knowledge is heavily social in nature. Communities of practice therefore provide an ideal context for developing, sharing and stewarding knowledge in organisations. Many knowledge management researchers present communities of practice as a compelling form of informal organisational structure capable of producing remarkable outcomes. However, eclipsed by the celebrations of numerous success stories are unpublished but nonetheless important cases in which efforts to build and sustain communities of practice have failed. This paper traces the inception, development and eventual demise of a community of practice among e-learning instructional designers at Holden College. It also attempts to explain why the initiative, which seemed to enjoy a promising start, fizzled out completely in less than one-and-a-half years. The key learning points distilled from this case can be used to inform managers who are contemplating starting communities of practice in their own organisations. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of communities of practice was first introduced more than ten years ago (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Since then, it has continued to draw attention from both scholars and practitioners (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Cook and Yanow, 1993; Orr, 1996). Its popularity has been fuelled, in part, by the realisation that knowledge is heavily social in nature. Communities of practice provide an ideal context for developing, sharing and stewarding knowledge in organisations. Hence, most knowledge management researchers present communities of practice as a compelling form of informal organisational structure capable of producing remarkably successful outcomes. For example, through communities of practice, Hill's Pet Nutrition enjoyed significant reductions in pet food wastage due to improved packaging while Hewlett-Packard suc-

ceeded in standardising sales processes and establishing a consistent pricing scheme (Wenger and Snyder, 2000). As another example, the community of practice built by the US Navy and the Defense Acquisition University has grown to 3,200 members and attracted close to 9,000 online contributions (Glennie and Hickok, 2003).

However, eclipsed by the celebrations of numerous success stories are unpublished but nonetheless important cases in which efforts to build and sustain communities of practice failed. This paper traces the inception, development and eventual demise of a community of practice in an institute of higher education in Asia. It seeks to examine the *bona fide* experience of developing a community of e-learning instructional designers at Holden College. In addition, it also attempts to explain why the initiative, which seemed to enjoy a promising start, fizzled out completely in less than one-and-a-half years. The key learning points distilled from this case can be used to inform managers who are contemplating starting communities of practice in their own organisations.

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THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Communities of practice are conceptualised as an informal aggregation of members who are drawn by common interests to engage in sense-making activities through sharing, learning and solving problems (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Brown and Duguid, 1991). More specifically, they are defined by three main structural elements, namely, domain, community and practice (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). Domain refers to the sphere of knowledge and expertise held by members. Community denotes the relationship, affinity and the sense of belonging among members. Practice refers to the common set of frameworks, ideas and tools members share. The presence of these elements creates a shared context in which a multiplicity of perspectives on problems and issues are constantly exchanged, validated, refined and accepted. Such an iterative process fittingly dovetails with the socially-oriented nature of knowledge and makes communities of practice excellent structures for developing, sharing and stewarding knowledge.

Communities of practice are a natural part of organisational life. They exist and develop on their own whether or not the organisation recognises them or encourages their creation. For example, communities of practice were found in an international actuarial firm and an IT support team (Hildreth *et al.*, 2000). However, they are unlikely to achieve their full potential if the organisation within which they are situated fails to play a role in cultivating them. For this reason, several organisations such as Abbey National, Unisys and Ericsson have taken deliberate steps to ensure the communities of practice in their organisations flourish (Winkelen and Ramsell, 2003).

Several suggestions have been made with respect to aspects relating to the design a successful community of practice. Wenger, *et al.* (2002), proposed that there are seven design principles. For example, a budding community should not be forced to adopt a fixed structure but be allowed to evolve organically as it grows. Also, different levels of participation in the community should be invited so that all members have a role to play based on their varied degree of commitment and interests. Winkelen and Ramsell (2003) also contend that the key to a successful community of practice is to align the values among members' motivation to participate and the organisation's need to support the community. Vestal (2003) further lists ten traits for a successful community one of which is a clear business value proposition for all stakeholders.

We argue that it is nonetheless a fallacy to assume that designing and building a successful community of practice can be reduced to a deterministic list of recipes. Contextual factors such as organisational forces, dynamics relationships and interactions among members and other emerging issues often work against a well-laid plan and thwart efforts to sustain a community of practice. This paper examines an initiative to build a community of practice at Holden College, an institute of higher education in Asia. It also seeks to explain why the community of practice, in spite of being started amidst seemingly favourable conditions, failed to sustain itself after a short time-span.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research into Holden College's community of practice was undertaken using case study method (Eisenhardt, 1989). Individuals who were either involved or familiar with the initiative were identified and interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire. The rationale for conducting these types of interviews was to draw rich, contextual details which could not have been elicited via closed-ended survey instruments. The interviewees included management staff, core group members who represented the leadership of the community, community members and teaching staff who were not directly part of the community but were the intended recipients of outputs generated by the community. The involvement of such a wide variety of stakeholders allowed data to be obtained from multiple levels and perspectives. In addition, archival data in the form of email correspondence, memos, concept papers and websites was collected to triangulate the responses given by the interviewees. However, it is important to note that contradictory data which could not be reliably verified from officially released sources was omitted. Data which yielded a consistent pattern was analysed and used to trace the inception, development and eventual demise of the community of practice at Holden College.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE IN HOLDEN COLLEGE

Background

Holden College is a government-funded institute of higher education in Asia. Boasting a total staff strength of 1,200 and a student population of

more than 10,000, it offers bachelor's and master's degree programmes across a range of disciplines such as business, information technology, engineering and education. In October 2001, as part of its campus-wide e-learning expansion strategy, Holden College announced a plan to develop expertise in the area of e-learning instructional design. The goal was to build a pool of instructional designers (IDs) made up of teaching staff selected from the various departments within the College. The IDs' primary role, in addition to their existing teaching duties, was to support fellow colleagues in the same department in the design and development of effective e-learning courseware. Since the various departments operated largely as autonomous entities, the selection of IDs and their job scope would be overseen by the management of the respective department to which the individual IDs belonged.

The development of IDs fell under the purview of the Centre for Pedagogy, an academic support unit in the College. Derek, a senior staff from the Centre, was given the responsibility of organising a customised instructional designer course for two batches of selected staff. The course, which lasted for 12 weeks, commenced in March 2002 and saw the first batch of 25 IDs coming together. Most of the prospective IDs did not know each other well because of the numerous departments from which they were drawn and the size of the overall staff complement at Holden College.

A significant portion of the course involved e-learning and asynchronous discussions among the IDs. In this way, the IDs could continue with their teaching duties in their respective departments with minimal disruption whilst participating in the course. The course concluded with a half-day face-to-face project presentation.

The inception of the CoP

When the course was over, one important follow-up action was to foster knowledge sharing among the IDs so that good e-learning instructional design practices could be efficiently spread throughout the College. To help achieve this goal, Derek, approached a few IDs individually and raised the idea of setting up a community of practice (CoP) for IDs.

The CoP could leverage on the newly established socio-structural boundary within which the IDs were situated as a result of participation in the course and the strategic need to develop e-learning instructional materials. Furthermore, the timing was apt since it built on the prevailing campus-wide interest on e-learning instructional design.

For these reasons, the circumstances seemed favourable to the inception of the CoP.

Six IDs responded positively to Derek's invitation and became core members of the CoP. They had no prior knowledge of communities of practice but were enthused mainly by the novelty of this new initiative. The basis for their involvement was entirely voluntary. One of them noted:

Even though we all belong to the same College, we have always been working within the confines of our departments. I think this is a great opportunity to interact with colleagues from other departments and learn from each other.

Meanwhile, Mabel, an IT staff from the Centre of Pedagogy was drafted into the core group to provide technical support to the CoP.

The first core group meeting was held in August 2002. The basic idea was to secure ownership and a sense of purpose among the core members. In addition, core members were introduced to the concept of communities of practice. Derek offered to be the coordinator of the CoP. An interim website designed specifically for the CoP was also unveiled. It was agreed during the meeting that the website would not be main focus through which CoP interactions would take place. Rather it was decided that the CoP would still be very much dependent on face-to-face interactions.

In subsequent core group meetings, several operational issues were addressed. For example, the roles of the core members and that of the management were discussed. In addition, the frequency and possible agenda of CoP meetings were also discussed. Formal meetings aside, Derek attempted to become more acquainted with individual core members by chatting with them separately over tea to discuss matters related to the CoP. On a few occasions, he arranged for all of them to meet for lunch. This demanded a considerable coordination effort because core members had different teaching schedules and were located in different parts of the campus. Perhaps an indication that meeting face-to-face in future might provide some challenges.

The core group presented the idea of the CoP to the College's management team and received a formal endorsement in September 2002. It crafted six value propositions, three of which related to the College and the other three related to the IDs:

- The CoP will enable Holden College to differentiate itself through the design and development of excellent teaching and learning practices for e-learning
- The CoP will build a pool of experts in instructional design among whom skills and knowledge

related to instructional design are created, shared and stewarded.

- The CoP will serve as the resource for implementing campus-wide teaching and learning strategies for e-learning
- The CoP will allow IDs to interact with experts (internal and external) in developing effective e-learning courseware materials.
- The CoP will enable IDs to develop professionally in the area of instructional design. They may benchmark their expertise, share their insights and find immediate help for their problems.
- The CoP will create both a sense of belonging and a sense of professional identity among IDs

Since it did not wish to be bound by targets imposed from above, the core group refrained from making request for any resources in order to initiate CoP activities. The College's management also understood this to be a bottom-up initiative driven by staff's personal interests and passions with respect to instructional design. Hence, it did not expect, or demand, any substantial results from the CoP. Nonetheless, the IDs were still individually accountable for their activities and performance to the departments from which they belonged.

The development of the CoP

After receiving the official endorsement from the management team, Derek sent an email to all IDs in October 2002 and informed them of the instigation of the CoP. He also notified them that they could register themselves online as members of the CoP. CoP members would then be invited to attend sharing sessions on instructional design to be held four times yearly.

A link to the CoP website was included in the email. To increase the value of the website, it was designed to help CoP members locate high-quality and relevant articles from among the voluminous reading assignments prescribed during the instructional design course. The website also incorporated peer-rating features with respect to all these articles. Core members set an example by initially rating several of the articles. The website also provided Internet links to the IDs' projects and supported threaded discussion between the users of the CoP and the core group. To guide users in giving comments, two text boxes, namely 'I like this project because ...' and 'I don't like this project because ...' were included.

A month after the instigating email was sent, more than half of the 25 IDs signed up as CoP

members. Those who registered revealed that they wanted to learn more about instructional design work from other colleagues. However, one of the IDs who did not register expressed her fear of commitment to the CoP:

I still do not have a clear idea of what this CoP is all about, and what I am getting into. Better to wait and see than to plunge into something which I cannot get out of easily later.

To raise the visibility of the CoP in the College, Derek led the core members to brainstorm a variety of deliverables the CoP could produce. In one of the meetings, it was decided that the deliverables potentially could emerge from two sources, namely, management's requests as well as the CoP members' needs. All potential deliverables could then be evaluated on a two-dimensional scale, namely, reach and impact. The first dimension referred to the expected number of staff who would potentially find a given deliverable useful. The second dimension was the expected level of excitement and fizzle that the deliverable could generate.

After some deliberation, a decision was made to work on a deliverable that could reach out to as many teaching staff as possible. This was identified as the Checklist for Effective Learning, CEL. In addition to being the point of convergence of the efforts of members of the CoP, the CEL was also intended to reflect the collective wisdom and experience of all CoP members.

The purpose of the CEL was to help teaching staff present teaching materials on the College's e-learning platform effectively. It sought to highlight salient instructional design issues and contained a variety of items on a checklist, including a welcome message, outline of topics and assessment scheme. Each item had an accompanying example as well as a brief discussion on the rationale for its inclusion in the overall design.

Signs of trouble for the CoP

The first sign of trouble was that only three core members were actively involved in contributing to the CEL. In spite of a few rounds of email being sent to solicit more feedback, no further members of the CoP members responded. Most of them felt that the CEL was not pertinent to them. Furthermore, in the face of many other pressing demands, work related to the CoP, which was understood to be voluntary, was conveniently ignored. One CoP member explained:

Everyday, we are swamped with hundreds of emails, each crying out for our attention. We

need to prioritise tasks that are of real importance to us. Maybe someone else can look into the CEL.

Eventually, the CEL was completed and published on the CoP website in March 2003. An email was also sent to all teaching staff inviting them to browse and even refine the CEL. The CEL, which drew positive comments from numerous staff across the campus, attracted close to a hundred hits. The College's management was also pleased with the outcome. However, based on the understanding that the CoP was an informal and autonomous structure, the management maintained their hands off approach to the CoP.

Meanwhile, as Derek was busy preparing for the second run of the instructional design course, he had not called for any core group meetings for almost five months. Neither did any of the core members initiate a meeting of the group themselves. As a result, the official CoP meetings that had been planned to take place four times a year had not taken place. Derek clarified the situation as follows:

Any core members are free to initiate a core group meeting. They do not necessarily have to wait for me to do so. As for CoP meetings, we need to be careful because many CoP members are involved. They are busy people and we respect their time. We do not wish to host a CoP meeting if we do not have something valuable to share with them. Otherwise, we lose credibility the next time round we wish to call for such a meeting.

When the second run of the course commenced in May 2003, Derek introduced the CoP to the new group of IDs. Instead of making participation in the CoP optional, as he had done with the first group of IDs he notified the new batch of IDs that they had been automatically made members of the CoP. This was done with the hope of expanding the CoP membership, thereby increasing the chances of galvanising more people into contributing to CoP deliverables.

An attempt to renew the core group

One core member expressed disappointment over the nonchalant approach of the CoP's leadership. He suggested that the core group be disbanded and recomposed of only those with a passion to drive the CoP forward. In an attempt to renew the core group, Derek extended a personal invitation to those IDs from the second offering of the training course who were keen to participate in

the CoP. A new core group was thus formed and met for the first time in August 2003. It comprised six members, three of whom, including Derek, were from the previous core group.

Derek led the new core group to identify a second CoP deliverable and eventually agreed to extend the work done on the CEL. This deliverable was a compilation of good e-learning examples ranging from those with minimal user interactivity to those that were highly interactive.

An email was sent to all CoP members requesting them to recommend between one and three good e-learning examples from their departments. Each recommendation was to be accompanied by the following details: name of the subject, the author of the subject, level of interactivity, a brief description of the e-learning features and a few appropriate screen-shots.

Through some persistent cajoling, a few CoP members finally made a total of 15 recommendations. The core group met on two occasions to review all the submissions. Finally, 10 examples, covering a range of subjects domains such as business, IT, engineering and mathematics were selected. The results were again posted on the CoP website in early October 2003. However, these e-learning examples attracted lukewarm responses. One member of the teaching staff commented:

I have seen quite a few of the supposedly good e-learning examples but I do not find them relevant for me. Furthermore, I am sure there must be better e-learning examples than those listed.

The fall of the CoP

The core group started to feel worn down by the apathy of the CoP members and the negative feedback from teaching staff. One core member disclosed:

It has been difficult and discouraging for us in the core group. We have not received much support from our peers even though we have spent much time and effort to put the CoP deliverables together. Is the CoP really worth it?

In November 2003, the resignation of two core members from the College dealt a severe blow to the already waning fervour of the core group. Derek evaluated the situation and concluded that the CoP had thus far been laboriously and artificially prodded into action:

CoP was started as a natural vehicle to help us develop and share instructional design knowledge. But so far, we ended up trying to keep it alive more than we could get anything

substantial out of it. Perhaps we should stop our social engineering efforts and let it evolve more naturally. If it must be abolished to give way to some other more appropriate structures or mechanisms, I am all for it.

Even though Derek and the core group did not officially declare the CoP dissolved, all activities related to the CoP effectively ceased: no new outputs were produced after the second CoP deliverable; no core meetings were called after September 2003; and, finally, the CoP meetings which were intended to bring all members together never took place.

DISCUSSION

The CoP at Holden College was established based on a group of teaching staff shortly after they had been designated as IDs. The newly-defined role bestowed on these IDs encapsulated them within a socio-structural boundary which, one would have thought, provided an ideal context for developing the community. Furthermore, the timing of developing the CoP was apt because it built on the prevailing campus-wide interest on e-learning instructional design. The CoP received leadership endorsement and had adequate technical support. However, despite the presence of these favourable conditions, the CoP was effectively failed after one and a half years. Underneath the smooth start of the CoP was a strong undercurrent that went undetected. We suggest that there were four contributing factors that led to the CoP's decline.

A pseudo-community

As has been observed above, a community of practice is defined by three main structural elements, namely, domain, community and practice (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). In the case of the CoP in Holden College, its domain fell within the field of instructional design; its community was drawn from among the group of IDs; its practice was focused on the design and development of e-learning courseware. While the domain and the practice of the CoP would appear to have been appropriate and relevant to the College, the community aspect had not been adequately developed. In fact, the CoP was built around a pseudo-community, that is one having the outward form but not the substance of a genuine community. The CoP members were all similarly designated as IDs and had undergone the same training course. However, they did not become sufficiently acquainted with each other throughout the lifespan of the CoP. This was attrib-

uted in part to the fact that instructional designer course, which set the stage for the CoP to be conceived, afforded limited face-to-face interaction opportunity. Also, many of them did not participate actively in the online discussion sessions that took place during the course. When probed, one CoP member revealed:

There is no doubt I have gained much out of this instructional design course. But being engaged in the online discussion is not something I would do naturally. In fact, during the second phase of the course, when work piled up, I sometimes forgot to login to the system for days.

After the instructional designer course was over, there were no follow-up plans to organise ways for CoP members to interact either socially or professionally. CoP members remained dispersed throughout their various departments. Furthermore, communication between the core group and the individual CoP members was solely via the email. Messages have the characteristics of being uni-directional and did not request or seem to support interaction. Hence, without the simultaneous and collective engagement of all the CoP members, the social capital of the CoP could not be developed. Social capital, a salient asset possessed by healthy and thriving communities, may be characterised along three primary dimensions, namely, a perception that individuals are part of a larger network (structural dimension), a sense of trust among individuals (relational dimension) and a shared understanding of the issues facing the organisation (cognitive dimension) (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). It appeared that the CoP lacked, in particular, the structural and relational dimensions of the social capital.

Weak leadership

Furthermore, the absence of a genuine community coupled with the relatively unthoughtful selection of core members based on an initial indication of interest led to a weak leadership structure in the CoP. In particular, the core members did not have the opportunity to go through an important process known as legitimate peripheral participation in which one becomes recognised and accepted by the community, grows in maturity and eventually earns respect from peers (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Without legitimate peripheral participation which is integral to building trust and power relations in the community, core members did not gain legitimacy in leading the CoP.

Another issue related to the leadership of the CoP was the lack of a critical mass of committed,

like-minded individuals. The first core group was comprised of those who were drawn by the novelty of starting a CoP. However, when the demand fell on them to contribute to the CEL, only three were active. As time passed, almost all of them slipped into a state of indifference. The renewed core group comprised those who inherited a wavering ideal from the previous group. Given this background it is hardly surprising that when two core members resigned, the entire group collapsed.

In much of the knowledge management literature, communities of practice are assumed to possess self-management capability. For example, the technical reps at Xerox organised themselves around informal settings to solve work-related problems before their efforts became formalised and took the form of the Eureka project (Brown and Duguid, 2000). The virtual communities of practice cited by several authors, for example, Hidreth *et al.* (2000) and Ardichvili *et al.* (2003), also show evidence of being shaped and led by members themselves. The role of leadership in building and sustaining these communities, on the other hand, has received relatively little mention. The case of Holden College highlights the role of internal leadership to be a critical factor to the longevity of the CoP. In particular, the possession of a legitimacy to lead and a strong commitment to the cause of the CoP proved to be essential elements of leadership.

Under-leveraged management support

The core group also failed to strategically leverage on the management teams' support for the CoP. It is understandable that at the point of the inception of the CoP, the core group did not request any resources from the management as it did not wish to be bound by any targets. However, when the CoP generated its first output, namely, the CEL which was very well-received, it missed the opportunity of garnering a greater level of support from the management team and, hence, of achieving an elevation to its stature in the College. The management team had been generally supportive of the CoP but it appeared that it had to be informed specifically on what role it could play to help. A member of the management team commented on the CoP that:

We are well aware of the work done by the CoP. In fact, the output they have produced has been highly commendable. We are always open to discuss how best we can help to support their efforts.

For example, the core group could have requested authorisation from the management

team to gain access into a department and create a contextualised version of the CEL to meet the peculiar needs of that department. Conceivably, such a move could have attracted an increased sense of ownership from the department and could have provided a sufficient basis allowing the CoP to draft in local champions.

The support from top management has been commonly cited as an important success factor for knowledge management initiatives (Trussler, 1998; Storey and Barnett, 2000; Davenport and Prusak, 1999). The experience gained from Holden College supplements extant literature by suggesting that initial management support is necessary but does not guarantee the eventual success of communities of practice. Furthermore, rather than being a static notion dispensed unilaterally from the top, management support is a resource that has to be explicitly and justifiably requested bottom-up when needed. More than anything it represents an ongoing interaction between management and the community of practice.

Misalignment of values

Finally, since its inception, the CoP was driven largely by the projects identified by the core group. The completion of the projects became the basis on which the CoP derived its reason for existence. This led to two major problems. First, there was an over-emphasis on the tangible outcome of the projects at the expense of other intangible but equally important aspects relating to community building such as the collaborative process of identifying the projects and the development of interactions among CoP members. Second, while the projects undertaken by the CoP were valued by the management team, they did not seem to serve the needs of individual CoP members. This was because the involvement in the projects was ancillary rather than an integral part of the day-to-day work. Hence, the CoP was feebly and temporarily sustained only by those who were willing.

The importance of aligning the values created by a community of practice to both the individual members and the organisation has been consistently emphasised in the literature (Wenger *et al.*, 2002; Winkelen and Ramsell, 2003). The case of Holden College illustrates that even though the core group understood this principle as evidenced by the set of value propositions it originally developed, the actual implementation was fraught with difficulty. The approach of identifying projects which were significant to the College and then motivating CoP members to complete them proved to be a costly mistake. With the benefit of hindsight,

projects identified could have been drawn from the CoP members' existing work-in-progress or potential future projects. Thereafter, only projects which exerted a wider sphere of influence in the College would be escalated for consideration by CoP members collectively. In this way, CoP projects would attract participation from members because they were contextually meaningful and could be integrated with their day-to-day work. At the same time, the CoP could reinforce its legitimacy in the College because the projects it delivered were strategically significant.

CONCLUSION

Over the past decade, the notion of communities of practice has gained rapid currency among scholars and practitioners in the field of knowledge management. Due to their organic and socially-oriented nature, communities of practice offer a viable way for knowledge to be developed, shared and stewarded. Furthermore, they would potentially seem to represent an inexpensive strategy for organisations to improve performance and remain competitive. However, in recent years, many organisations have realised that communities of practice are more difficult to build and sustain than originally thought. Not only do the purported benefits appear illusive but also the negative experiences with communities of practice have led any future initiatives aimed at improving the organisation to be viewed with scepticism. Unlike many of the previously published works on communities of practice which tend to focus generally on positive outcomes, this paper has examined the experience of failed attempt to develop a community of e-learning instructional designers in Holden College. There are at least four important lessons learned.

Locate a genuine community

First, a community of practice should always be seeded and developed from a naturally-occurring community. Successful communities such as those found among technical reps in Xerox (Brown and Duguid, 2000), and civilian and military workers in US Department of Defense (Glennie and Hickok, 2003) invariably leverage on the initial existing human network of interest before expanding to a more sophisticated structure. In addition to affording a shared context within which members enjoy an on-going social relationship, a naturally-occurring community facilitates a shared ownership of activities and responsibility to solve problems-at-hand. Trying to goad a community of practice

into existence by assembling a group of people together who do not share existing relationships or interests runs the risk of creating a pseudo-community, not unlike the case of Holden College. Such a community is difficult to sustain.

Locate informal leaders and seek plurality of leadership

While factors such as the extent of willingness to lead and seniority in the organisation may appear to be compelling criteria for leadership selection in communities of practice, the experience at Holden College suggests two other important considerations. One, operating outside the bounds of bureaucratic structures and formal lines of accountability, leaders in communities of practice typically derive legitimacy from the trust and respect earned from members rather than from official positions and titles. Individuals who are well-regarded among peers due to their expertise or their established sphere of influence are therefore appropriate candidates with whom leadership possibilities can be explored. Two, in addition to identifying informal leaders, the core group needs to be comprised of a critical mass of like-minded individuals. Plurality of leadership at the initial stage of the developing the community is necessary to provide sufficient momentum to rally support from the ground and thrust community efforts forward.

Leverage management support

For pragmatic reasons, the management which supports community activities expects an output that is commensurate with the resources invested. Hence, it is wise for a budding community of practice which does not have any records of accomplishment to refrain from making bold request for resources initially. Such an approach frees the community to chart its own course without the pressure from the top to dictate its activities and direction. However, as the community develops and delivers tangible results, it could and should appropriately exploit its successes to garner greater support from the management. Management support, in the form of resources or mandates, could afterwards be leveraged to spawn more successes, which can in turn help sustain the community.

Align values between members, the community and the organisation

Members' motivation to participate in the community hinges on intellectual, emotional, pragmatic reasons or a combination of these (Winkelen and

Ramsell, 2003). The community maintains its relevance only if it can effectively address organisational needs. Hence, the community needs to achieve a balance between meeting the needs of the members and serving the goals of the organisation. A practical approach to aligning values between members, the community and the organisation is to integrate the involvement of community activities with members' day-to-day work which are strategically significant to the organisation.

This paper has traced the inception, development and eventual demise of a community of practice at Holden College. It seeks to explain why the initiative, which seemed to enjoy a promising start but fizzled out completely in a relatively short time-span. The four important lessons culled from this failed experience can be useful to managers who are contemplating starting communities of practice in their own organisations. Hopefully, mistakes identified in the case of Holden College can be averted.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The actual names of the college and its people cited in this paper have been concealed for confidentiality reasons.

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