5 When Communities of Practice Fail: Community Ties and Organizational Commitment

Gaela Bernini and Jane Klobas

5.1 Communities of Practice

Communities of practice (CoPs) are groups of people with significant interpersonal ties built through the process of collective learning about a common practice [27]. Research about CoPs has concentrated on their role in knowledge management, with results that demonstrate their value for knowledge creation, knowledge sharing and as repositories of knowledge [7; 14; 16; 25; 29].

The CoP is a social device which connects people around a specific practice within a domain of human endeavor. The domain is the field or discipline which draws members together. The practice is the particular application or work activity that is the focus of knowledge creation, transfer and storage within the CoP [7]. CoPs are associated more with problem solving and sharing of tacit knowledge than with procedures and rules. Recognizing that theories, process designs, manuals and other formal devices for explaining and organizing practice are unable to deal with the complexity of much modern work, CoPs aim to solve problems and draw out tacit knowledge. Often, they use collaboration and narrative to deal with aspects of practice that may range from the mundane but unplanned for to dealing with incoherencies and irrationalities in the formal system [19].

Successful communication within a CoP relies on trust, mutual respect and reciprocity as individual members express doubt, and ask for and provide advice to one another. The interaction between participants assumes a social contract in which mutual expectations of others’ behavior during exchanges are satisfied. This tacit agreement implies individual willingness to shift from being a worker to being a member [13]. In fact, membership, the feeling that one invests part of oneself and therefore has the right
to belong [2], is an important notion in relation to CoPs. There are people who belong to a CoP and people who do not. This distinction generates boundaries which provide members with the emotional security necessary to let them expose themselves and allow intimacy to develop [10].

5.1.1 CoPs in the Organization

While most of the literature has glorified CoPs as effective means of managing and generating knowledge, some observations by Wenger and his colleagues suggest that there are some organizational risks. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder [28] have identified cases where CoPs are unrecognized by the organization and there is therefore no reflexivity between the organization and the community, and cases where CoPs are legitimated to the extent that become a target of management strategy. In both sets of cases, it can be difficult for management to steer CoPs. There may be: an excess of personal commitment to the CoP, leading to arrogance and elitism; imperialism, particularly where the community domain is considered more relevant to members than other organizational fields; tight bonds (cliques) within a group which acts as a restrictive gatekeeper; and lack of documentation, or development of dialects specific to the community, or both, which make diffusion of knowledge within the organization difficult. Given the cohesive and exclusionary forces that may emanate from within CoPs, CoPs may weaken organizations as community members establish distance from non-members.

In this chapter, we examine the relationship between intra-organizational CoPs (i.e., CoPs that exist within the boundaries of a single organization) and the organization within which they reside. We consider CoPs as organizational resources which, along with other resources, need to be reconciled and aligned to permit the organization to pursue its goals. In particular, we concentrate on the relationship between CoPs and organizational cohesion. The negative effects of poor organizational cohesion are believed to be profound: “lack of shared identity creates dissonance and makes collective action … impossible – groups disintegrate, organizations become less than the sum of their parts” [6] (p113). We ask if CoPs, with their strong internal ties, threaten organizational cohesion.

As an indicator of organizational cohesion, we focus on organizational commitment (OC), the willingness of individual members of the organization to contribute to organizational purposes and success [15; 18] absenteeism and turnover [18]. We expect the strength of ties within a CoP to be inversely related to OC, i.e., the stronger the ties to a CoP the weaker CoP members’ commitment to the organization is expected to be.