Building a Community of Practice

Introduction

Communities of practice have become the most natural way in which tacit knowledge is managed within organisations and knowledge fields. They are not structured teams. Instead, they are informal groups or networks of professionals who share common problems, common interests or common knowledge, and who communicate with each other about this. They are a great target and resource if you want to communicate information, evidence or knowledge.

The core competency of communities of practice is that they can enable a learning conversation. Communities of practice encourage people to bring quality to their work because the network feeds their passion. Organisations can shepherd their core competencies through nurturing communities of practice. The main value of communities of practice come from the messy conversations that people can have either face-to-face or through virtual conversations, because it is through these interactions that people can ask questions, receive answers and do their work most effectively.

Key ingredients in Communities of practice

Designing a community is akin to planning a city. Everything is a negotiation between the design and the community itself that can accept or reject aspects of the design. Key elements are:

• *Purpose*. Shared purpose, or passion; shared needs and clear value potential pertain. Scott Peck describes various stages of communities of practice: pseudo-communities (in which people remain at the level of politeness); chaos (where people decide that they need to defend their views); emptiness (people empty themselves of the desire of changing others); and community building.

• *Enablers* include technology, time, budget, support and incentives.

• *Leadership* of the community (dealt with in greater depth below).

• *Processes*. People may want to use different means of communicating which is why flexible communication strategies are as important as storytelling and learning conversations.

• *People*. Competencies, affinities, commitment, behaviours and diversity of perspectives are all elements that people bring to communities of practice.

• *Time* (cited as an enabler) is a key issue.

Leadership roles and responsibilities in fostering Communities of practice

• Virtual conversations can become very disjointed and the leader must ensure that the threads are easily woven to overcome possible fragmentation.

• In a virtual environment people get hurt because it is easy to misread intentions and leaders must manage this. Events should be created to keep the life of the community

healthy. A community can be actively nurtured to improve participation and the experiences of members.

• Communities of practice have to be marketed so that levels of participation are improved.

• Leaders also have to believe that communities of practice add value to the core business of an organisation so that they can honestly defend the space needed for communities of practice to function effectively.

• The task of communities of practice is to contribute to an organisation so that it becomes more sophisticated at doing what it does better. Communities of practice need to move beyond helping each other, to developing a more proactive forward-looking role: away from parochialism towards boundlessness.

Stages of development Figure 6: Communities of Practice: Stages of Development
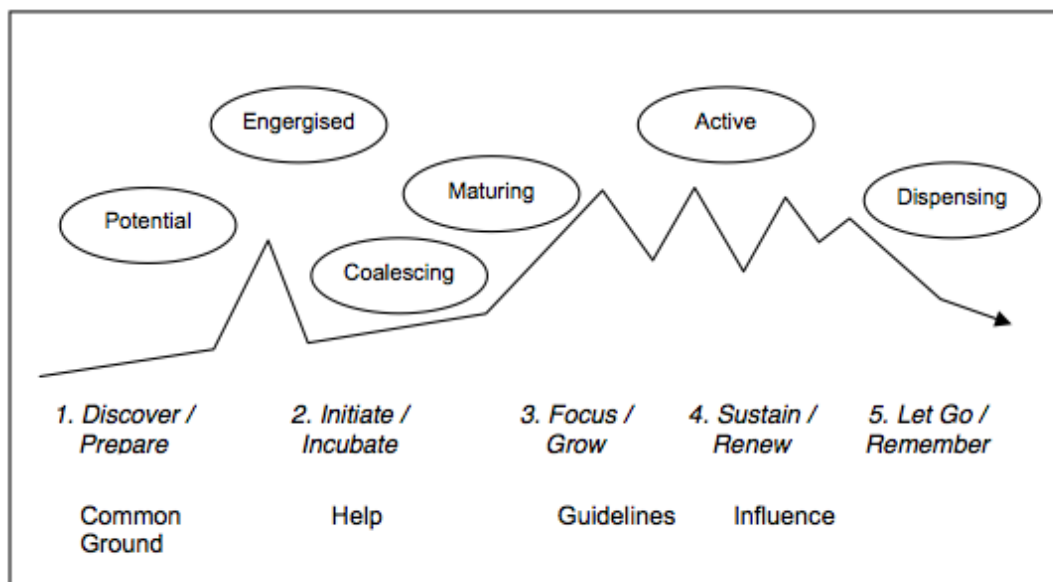
Source: Adapted from McDermott and Wenger (2000)

There is always a flush of enthusiasm for new communities of practice when they come into being. Invariably this wears off and Scott Peck's 'emptiness' phase is experienced. Reflection and refocusing become important and integration into the organisation has to be addressed. The rationale for involvement becomes pertinent and the community of practice as a whole deals with the rhythms of its life.

Source

• De Merode, Louis (2000) 'Introduction to Communities of Practice' in the report of the Bellanet Workshop, Brighton.

Further resources

• Wenger, Etienne and William Snyder (2000) 'Communities of Practice: the organisational frontier', in *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2000.

• Ramalingam, Ben (2005) 'The Knowledge and Learning Toolkit', London: ODI (forthcoming). Especially for further resources on the step-by-step process and more detailed explanations of each step.