

High-Performance Teams And Communities Of Practice

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Abstract

This paper compares and contrasts teams and Communities of Practice, and at least partially resolves the rhetorical question “aren’t Communities of Practice just like teams with another name?” Findings derive from intensive work with both types of work groups, and considered within the extant literature. The study builds on and refines the rich body of knowledge on teams and teamwork and contributes substantially to the emerging understanding of Communities of Practice. Similarities and differences between teams and Communities of Practice are sometimes subtle, sometimes striking. Communities of Practice are most like self-directing teams. They share critical success factors including maturity and effectiveness in tools and ways of working that govern and enable collaboration and self-management. Both must possess or be developing skills, knowledge, behaviours, and supporting attitudes in a range of areas, including visioning, defining purpose and objectives, understanding and contending with capabilities, problem-solving, decision-making, managing performance and sustainability, exploiting diversity, reconceptualising and reinventing, and implementing initiatives. In this context, effective collaboration across time, complex tasks, and diversity of membership implies individual and group self-leadership. Neither self-directing teams nor Communities of Practice have or rely solely on external supervision or direction. Thus, the nature and source of leadership is internal. There is some evidence that imposed, external leadership may be counterproductive to the evolving efficacy of self-directed teams and Communities of Practice, or that an enlightened form of collegial, facilitative leadership is required. While questions remain as to whether or not Communities of Practice can be mandated and formally established, certain organisational supports can be helpful. (256 words)

Introduction

This paper highlights some of the key similarities between high-performance, self-directing teams and Communities of Practice, as well as delineating important distinctions between them. Comparing and contrasting the two reveals that many factors, internal and external, critical to the effectiveness of high-performance, self-directing teams and Communities of Practice are the same. This holds true for factors that might impede performance, inhibit learning and development, or lead to “breakdowns” (Hays, 2004a), temporary setbacks, failure, or dissolution.

Findings outlined in this paper derive from intensive work with teams and Communities of Practice, and considered within the extant literature. A sample of the more relevant literature surveyed and how it relates to the themes in this paper is included in Table 1. Representing an extensive review of the literature, over 60 references are included at the conclusion of this paper. Empirically, the author has worked with and studied dozens of teams in the public and private sector, including customer service, software development, professional services consulting, and executive teams. Building on that team experience, the author recently spent one year as a core or peripheral member of four Communities of Practice and supporting several additional Communities of Practice as a process facilitator. Facilitate means to assist the [group] process or make easier the progress of a task, and a process facilitator is the person who does this. In group work, a facilitator may be a group member or an external person brought in to assist the group develop or move forward. Facilitation is a crucial skill needed by all groups, particularly those whose membership is large and diverse. The more complicated the nature of the task and the more complex the environment in which a group works the more needed is effective facilitation. Since, as used here, Communities of Practice are generally self-directing, they also facilitate themselves – all members are at least theoretically the group facilitator. COP members would also recognise when outside facilitation is needed. Finally, as understood within the context of this study / paper, facilitation is a form of leadership, and thus should be shared. [For additional background on facilitators and facilitation, see papers by McFadzean and associates, as referenced in McFadzean (2002)]. The author’s main membership was on a research project team run as a Community of Practice. Project team members agreed early on that we might best come to understand Communities of Practice, or COPs, if we attempted to operate as one. And, we did; for better or worse.

The core team Community of Practice operated very much like an Action Learning Set (Raelin, 2006), and much of the assistance and guidance provided to the range of Communities of Practice incorporated principles and practices of Action Learning. Some COP members had been previously exposed to Action Learning and participated in Action Research (Huxham and Vangen, 2000; Dick, 2002) projects as part of a post-graduate education program. Briefly, Action Learning is a group problem-solving process founded on learning from concrete experience and reflection. Emphasis is on learning from experience and acting on that learning. There are two foci: task / content (problem to be solved) and process (how the group goes about problem solving). It may involve a mix of discovery, dialogue, experimentation, analysis, and risk-taking. Collaborative skills are demanded and built through the Action Learning process. Action Learning is about change (*transformation*) – a key aspect and objective of leadership (Nadler and Tushman, 1990; Crom and Bertels, 1999; Ireland and Hitt, 1999; Graetz, 2000).

Recounting our bumps and starts, successes and failures, and lessons learnt as a Community of Practice would be a case study in and of itself. We went through and attempted to document developmental stages, as we witnessed the growth spurts and struggles other COPs were undergoing. There has been some attempt to depict stages of COP development. See, for instance, Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) and Dube, Bourhis, and Jacob (2005). The core / project team COP of which the author was a member also outlined a phase model of COP development, which is currently undergoing validation. This model, included as Appendix B, attempts to illustrate the level and kind of external leadership / facilitation needed at respective stages of COP development. That said, members of the core team and associated COPs commonly referred to forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning—borrowed from the popular team development model

attributed to Tuckman (see, for example, Tuckman and Jensen, 1977) and, perhaps, due to its familiarity—in describing COP behaviour and the maturity and efficacy of the various COPs.

For now, the author would like to distil and relate lessons from the overall research and address the specific question regarding how teams and COPs are and are not alike. The question was raised many times in the course of working with Communities of Practice and those interested in them. Difficult to answer at first, similarities and differences can now be articulated more confidently. A summary table is presented at Appendix A to compare and contrast teams and Communities of Practice. Significant similarities and dissimilarities are described thoroughly in the body of this paper. Communities of Practice are most like high-performance, self-directing teams and least like conventional teams formally established in organisations and led by a designated team leader.

Purposes of this study were to document the evolution of Communities of Practice, identify why they form, discover when and how they operate, and ascertain outcomes, particularly benefits. As a secondary objective, the study sought to identify what, if any, organisational supports and structures were necessary or helpful to Community of Practice formation, effectiveness, and sustainment. Several “spin-off” areas of interest emerged, as well, including the:

- contribution of reflective practice (Densten and Gray, 2001; Green, 2005; Hays, 2004b) in community learning and development;
- enactment of collaboration (see Table 1 for a sample of relevant literature) and collegiality;
- crucial role of facilitation (Bentley, 1994; Dirkx, 1999; and McFadzean, 2002)
- leadership and leadership development in “leaderless groups” (Counselman and Weber, 2004) and COPs (Huxham and Vangen, 2000).

The study builds on and refines the rich body of knowledge on teams and teamwork and contributes substantially to the emerging understanding of Communities of Practice.

Communities of Practice. COPs and Learning and Development.	
<p>Brown and Duguid. (1991). COPs can't be created top-down or managed, but autonomy should be preserved.</p> <p>Brown and Duguid. (1996). Criticise traditional training in favour of learning in working.</p> <p>Dewhurst and Navarro. (2004). Contribution of COPs to organisational learning and competitive advantage. Importance of relational learning processes.</p> <p>Green. (2005). COPs and learning for uncertain futures. Reflection / reflexivity. Requirement for trust in collaborative learning. Learner as subject, not object.</p> <p>Hara and Schwen. (2006). Five attributes: professional practitioners; shared meaning; social networks; supportive culture (trust); knowledge building. Cautions regarding managing or institutionalising COPs. Learning and teaching divide.</p> <p>Iedema, Meyerkort, and White (2005). COPs as emergent form of work, capable to deal with complexity and change as they are flexible and self-organising. Comparison of teams and COPs. Both involve participating, knowledgeing, and boundary-spanning.</p> <p>Lave and Wenger. (1991). Book. Communities and the social context of experience and learning. Meaning. Learning is located or situated in everyday practices (participation). Coined the term COP. Legitimate peripheral participation central.</p> <p>Lave and Wenger. (1999). Learning as increased participation in a COP.</p> <p>Lesser and Storck. (2001). COPs and social capital / organisational performance. Connections amongst practitioners, relationships, trust, and mutual obligation, common language and context. Identification. Identity and learning. Benefits to individuals and organisation.</p>	<p>Liedtka, J. (1999). Communities of Practice build meta-capabilities, sources of competitive advantage that enable organisations to change. COPs rely on value systems. Collaboration and participative leadership.</p> <p>McIntyre. (2003). COPs as empowering, participatory action research, democracy. Nature of communication and interaction in collaborative process of change.</p> <p>O'Donnell et al. (2003). Learning as social construction of meaning. Differences between teams and COPs. Communicative action / lifeworld (Habermas). Traditional leading control-oriented behaviour does not work.</p> <p>Swan, Scarbrough, and Robertson. (2002). COPs and innovation. May be disruptive. Multiple COPs in Knowledge Management and Learning Organisations. Management and institutionalising of COPs. COPs as change agent.</p> <p>Wenger. (1998). Book. Three dimensions: mutual engagement, mutual enterprise, shared repertoire. Four traits: negotiated meaning; preserving and creating knowledge; spreading information; home for identities. 14 indicators / characteristics. Four fundamental dualities: participation vs. reification; designed vs. emergent; identification vs. negotiability; local vs. global.</p> <p>Wenger, E., McDermott, and W. Snyder. (2002). Book – <i>Cultivating Communities of Practice</i>. Purpose of COP: common base of knowledge to build on (focus creative energies). Seven principles: design for evolution; open dialogue; different levels of participation; public and private spaces; focus on value; combine familiarity and excitement; create a rhythm (keep people involved but not over-taxed). A five-stage model of COP evolution.</p>
Teams, Teamwork, and Collaboration. Leadership / Leadership Development. Empowerment.	

<p>Allen and Hecht. (2004). Imbalance between belief in team effectiveness and empirical data to support it. Good review of the literature. Focus on social-emotional and competence-related outcomes of teams.</p> <p>Glassop. (2005). Organisational benefits of teams, including productivity and reduced turnover. Quality Circles and Self-Managing Work Groups.</p> <p>Huxham and Vangen. (2000). Emergent / informal leaders. Action Research. Problem w/ positional leaders. Empowerment and facilitation. Collaboration and growth of collaborative governance, service delivery, and problem solving. Shared leadership.</p> <p>Kirk and Shutte. (2004). Dialogue, collective empowerment, and connective leadership. Organisational Development and capacity-building. Reflection. COPs. Action Research. Transforming perspective.</p>	<p>Pearce. (2004). Shared leadership in teams equates to high-performance when teams are involved in knowledge work requiring interdependence, creativity, and complexity. Empowering leadership.</p> <p>Raelin. (2006). Action Learning and collaborative leadership. Concurrent leadership – leadership can be exhibited by more than one group member at a time.</p> <p>Taggar, Hackett, and Saha. (1999). Leadership emergence in autonomous teams. A team needs many leaders...</p>
Collaboration and Collegiality. Teaching and Learning. Communities of Practice in Academia.	
<p>Fincher and Tenenberg. (2006). COPs in academic settings (CS).</p> <p>Kushell, Ames, Heide, and Bosserman. (2003) Differences in competitive / individual and cooperative teaching and learning models.</p> <p>MacBeath. (2006). Shared / distributed leadership: everyone a leader; everyone a learner. Leadership for learning practice. Learning as a social activity. Dialogue.</p>	<p>Waddock and Walsh. (1999). COPs in academic settings. Action research and participant observation. Collaboration: vision, shared purpose. Change process. Fragility based on tensions between hierarchy and informality. Processes of collaboration.</p> <p>Zorfass and Rivero. 2005. The value of collaboration in improving teaching and learning. Leadership development as part of COP.</p>

Table 1. Overview and relationship of some of the more germane literature.

This and related studies are timely. High-performance, self-directed teams and Communities of Practice – while differing in organisational structure, format, and formality – both represent and contribute to shifts in management thought and organisational design. Organisations tend to be steadily moving away from command and control approaches to models that are more responsive, adaptive, and empowered (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993; Manz and Sims, 1995; Gaddz and Bird, 1996). Gone are the days where a supervisor continually looks over the labourer's shoulder scrutinising his or her work and managing to the minimum required standard. If eliminating middle layers of management didn't kill command and control, the virtual environment of global, distributed work performance and needs for constant creativity, innovation, and improvement deliver the final blow. Concomitantly, investment in team deployment and research appears as high as ever, if not greater (Dionne, Yammarino, Atwater, and Spangler, 2004), and the short history of Communities of Practice is marked by a dramatic upturn in attention (Kohlbacher and Mukai, 2007). There have been at least 400 papers published in scholarly journals since 2000 dealing with Communities of Practice, with relatively few published in the preceding decade, As deduced from Proquest Academic Research Library search, August 2007). It is imperative to better understand and deploy organisational forms that will deliver positive outcomes and continue to evolve and adapt in this dynamic and challenging environment (Dube, Bourhis, and Robertson, 2005).

Starting with teams

The use of teams across industries is essentially ubiquitous today (Allen and Hecht, 2004; Hays, 2004a). Employment of teams and research into teams and their use have shown a steady increase since the 1980s (Dionne et al, 2004; Zárraga-Oberty and De Saá-Pérez, 2006). With a minority who remain dubious, agreement appears high amongst both practitioners and academics that teams offer a range of potential benefits accruing to individual team members as well as their organisations (Allen and Hecht, 2004; Glassop, 2002). These include but are not limited to performance improvements in the areas of productivity, service delivery, and quality, creativity and innovation, and professional development and organisational capability-building. Teams can be motivating, inspiring, and sustaining, enhancing job satisfaction and providing meaning to an individual's work life. Whether or not and which of these and other benefits are realised depends on a number of factors, and these factors are fairly well established in the literature (Mickan and Rodger, 2000; Pearce, 2004). Benefits and the conditions internal and external to teams that enable them are discussed below.

Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1999; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 20002), due to their recent emergence, are less common and not as well understood as teams. Interest in Communities of Practice appears to be growing, as do attempts to establish and study them (O'Donnell et al, 2003; Hara and Schwen, 2006). Communities of Practice, or COPs, are essentially groups of individuals who unite together to improve practice. Various definitions and descriptions exist in the literature (Hara and Schwen, 2006) with respect to purpose, composition, size, and other discriminators, but there probably is not a standard definition or exemplar. Attempts to define COPs with precision may simplify study but complicate understanding and application. The simple definition provided, here, accommodates variations and meets, in principle, many definitions put forward.

Practice improvement or advancement may involve solving common problems, pursuing objectives that will serve all participants or their constituencies, or helping members to do their jobs better. COPs serve multiple purposes and employ diverse strategies in achieving

them. They can be found across a range of organisations in the public and private sectors (Gadman and Cooper, 2005). At one university with which the author is affiliated, Communities of Practice exist within faculties for academics concerned with teaching and learning, across faculties with a multi-disciplinary group whose focus is on the environment and sustainability, and at the institutional level for leadership development. COPs are further defined and described below.

Features of high-performance, self-directing teams and communities of practice

High-performance, self-directed teams and Communities of Practice demonstrate high levels of certain positive characteristics that enable a raft of benefits other work group forms do not or cannot sustain. These include:

- initiative
- professional development
- identification with the work group
- and / or organisation
- independence / autonomy
- Leadership / leadership development
- meaning of / from work
- ownership / commitment
- creativity / innovation
- motivation / sustained effort

Evidence for each of these dimensions was observed in prior work with high-performance, self-directing teams and during the one year working in and with diverse Communities of Practice, as encapsulated in the comparative vignettes provided here:

High-Performance, Self-Directing Teams	Communities of Practice
<p>This software maintenance team met each morning in a brief and focussed session to review work: backlog, assignments, progress, and challenges. As needed – and determined by the team – jobs were re-allocated or put on hold in favour of new priorities. Members reviewed their performance targets and how well they were doing, and made decisions resulting in changes in emphasis. This included looking at learning goals and assigning people to tasks where they would be more or less challenged accordingly. They actively celebrated when targets were met or other achievements were earned, and they set new targets as they felt appropriate. The team decided when vacations and time off were appropriate, and nominated members for promotion or merit pay. The “team leader” was available for crises, attended meetings when invited, and was generally perceived to be adding value by working behind the scenes. The whole team knew what they were supposed to be doing at any given time, they knew who was doing what, when, and how. Importantly, they knew what their strengths and weaknesses relative to their mandate were and managed professional development effectively. Customers lauded the team on its service ethic, responsiveness, and quality. Team members would often propose new services, products, and enhancements and the team would decide if, when, and how these would be adopted, if internal, or promoted to customers. Team members felt personally responsible for their own performance, the success of the team, and their contributions to the company.</p>	<p>The SuperCOP (a Community of Practice comprising active members of a diverse range of COPs) was formed as an outgrowth of working with separate Communities of Practice. It became evident that individuals already demonstrating leadership and collaborative skills could be leveraged to “kick start” the communities in which they were working. This was not a management idea or organisational initiative, but was a solution that seemed obvious to the individuals involved as a result of the tools and processes we were experimenting with as a group to facilitate COP growth and effectiveness. The SuperCOP had no designated leader, though there were individuals who were initially more instrumental in forming the community, providing direction, and keeping it alive. However, over the course of several months, COP participants became active members and increasingly took on leadership behaviours (we talk about leadership habits and actions, not roles). At first, SuperCOP was envisaged as a “reference group” to inform and validate initiatives, tools, and processes for COP effectiveness and advancement. Ultimately, the SuperCOP became the designers, organisers, and conductors of a national symposium on Communities of Practice. They did so voluntarily, believing that the value of their experience (professional development plus) outweighed the impingement on their time and other responsibilities. They did so because they came to believe in the merits of Communities of Practice and wanted to share this with others. The symposium was a smashing success, and SuperCOP members are now determining what to pursue next.</p>

These findings support earlier studies that identify attributes and products of high-performance, self-directing teams and Communities of Practice (see, for example, Iedema, Meyerkott, and White, 2005; Lesser and Storck, 2001; Zárraga-Oberty and De Saá-Pérez, 2006).

There are a number of commonalities between the high-performance, self-directing team and Community of Practice showcased in the foregoing vignettes. Briefly, both sustained effective operation over time with minimal external leadership. They met and surpassed their goals by working together productively. In addition to useful tools and work processes that enabled collaboration, shared commitment, principles, values, and a sense of ownership – personal investment – contributed to their success. This is clearly in agreement with Brown

and Duguid (1991) who stress the role of shared values and norms within Communities of Practice. (See also Fetterman (2002) who details a step-by-step process of collaboration leading to Communities of Practice and a culture of learning.) Individuals inside and outside these groups noted high levels of mutual support, esprit, and job satisfaction amongst team members. It is tempting to conclude that the autonomy, sense of responsibility, and sharing these work forms promote contribute to positive morale, motivation, fulfilment, and the desire to achieve even more. (Note that O'Donnell et al (2003) have presented a thorough comparison of teams and Communities of Practice.) Development of collaborative leadership (Avery, 1999; Rosenthal, 1998; Raelin, 2006) was particularly evident in the Communities of Practice to which the author was privy. Examples are provided in the section that follows.

A cut above

Two crucial aspects identified in this current study that set high-performance, self-directing teams and Communities of Practice apart from other teams and work groups are (1) the source and nature of leadership and (2) the intensity and quality of collaboration. (Interestingly, Raelin (2006) has united these two elements in addressing the question, does Action Learning promote collaborative leadership?) These two dimensions of effective performance are emphasised in the discussion below, as are other similarities and differences. While the literature reviewed as a part of this study, as showcased in Table 1, alludes to or infers the existence of both of these elements, neither figures prominently. Thus, these findings may be significant.

Source and nature of leadership

Both high-performance, self-directing teams and Communities of Practice demonstrate and promote leadership development. This is not the traditional role of designated leader in a formal position of authority, but a leadership that is shared or distributive (Liedtka, 1999; Waddock and Walsh, 1999; Raelin, 2006) across members of the team or group. They cannot and will not function without this internal leadership capacity. It is the author's experience that most people and most work groups have within them sufficient leadership potential. It may not be evident due to strong formal leadership surrounding them, lack of opportunity to lead and develop as leaders, lack of confidence, lack of skill, the holding of traditional views of leaders and leadership, and a host of other factors. Many people have not awakened to the fact that they can and, perhaps, should lead. Individuals and groups often flounder in the absence of strong leadership, seeking it or having it imposed upon them. In an unfortunate paradox, groups are often led such that inherent leadership potential remains dormant. Increasingly, building and bringing out the best in others, including their leadership skills, is seen as a leader's role (Heifetz and Laurie, 2003; and foreshadowed by Nadler and Tushman, 1990, and Manz and Sims, 1991).

Being an active member of a Community of Practice can make a meaningful difference in one's professional development, particularly in the area of leadership. The author and others observing individuals within COPs over the course of one year noted various changes in behaviour and thought, subtle and dramatic. The intensity of COP interaction – coupled with a fair amount of personal and shared reflection – focuses attention on self, as well, which may lead to behaviour change and a shift in attitudes (see Green, 2005, for a relevant discussion of reflection within the collaborative space, or Raelin, 2006, who discusses reflection in the Action Learning process). As a direct result of working in and with Communities of Practice, the author has become much more sensitive to and interested in gender differences and issues related to management, leadership, and organisational life... and, hopefully, more self-regulating (being aware of his own behaviour and how it contributes to interaction and relationships, and adopting healthier behaviours and attitudes). [See Manz (1986) for early work on self-regulation / self-leadership or Neck and Houghton (2006) for a more recent treatment. Also, Taylor-Bianco and Schermerhorn (2006) for application in an organisational change context.]

Other examples of professional and leadership development observed include:

- One fellow who shifted from a passive, reticent, and somewhat timid follower to a “take charge” leader in one of his COPs and an influential and more-confident active participant in another Community of Practice. He came to be valued as an insightful, dedicated, central figure.
- One woman who began to realise she approached meetings and interaction impatiently and argumentatively and committed to becoming more patient, encouraging, and constructive. She became a truly effective and inspiring group member and process facilitator.
- One senior manager who began to see how her directive, “take control” behaviour was exhausting her and impeding her effectiveness as leader. Almost weekly, she could be observed to be relaxing her hold, allowing and encouraging others to take more active roles and meaningfully participate in determining direction.

These few examples are merely the tip of the iceberg. There are numerous cases of individuals who became inspired through their work in Communities of Practice to take matters into their own hands and do something. These were basically all people who did not previously see themselves as leaders and believed they could achieve little without the support of those in formal positions of authority (or until they attained such status themselves). They also discovered that there is power in numbers; that is, how much one could accomplish in collaboration with others—the essence of Communities of Practice.

Intensity and quality of collaboration

One of the major discriminators of high-performance, self-directed teams and Communities of Practice is the level of collaboration that defines them. This collaboration is often frequent and intense, sometimes less so, but sufficiently effective to enable them to manage their day-to-day affairs with little to no direct supervision. Collaboration is the term of choice in defining how Communities of Practice operate. [Collegiality was often used simultaneously or in place of collaboration. Collegiality is a term related to “colleague” – a co-worker or professional peer – and that implies a working relationship characterised by respect, consideration, and cooperation. Within a framework of collegiality, equality is sought amongst diverse and complementary individuals, striving to the extent possible to reduce the affects of

power differentials. Snell (2001) addresses the issue of collegiality in COPs as distinguished from hierarchical structures. Two very interesting and different treatments of collegiality are Tapper and Palfreyman (2002) and Marlow, Kyed, and Connors (2005).]

Collaboration is part and parcel of a COP: the COP depends on the diversity of skills, abilities, knowledge, and perspectives of its members and their effective exploitation, or channelling toward shared purpose. (See Liedtka, 1999, for an overview on collaboration and its role in Communities of Practice, and Snell, 2001, for an interesting interpretation of dialogue, interaction, and learning in COPs.) And, since there is no explicit or designated leader or hierarchy, members must find ways to work together effectively. They aren't told what to do or how to do it. They cannot rely on standard ways of operating borrowed from conventional order, structure, or routine.

Collaboration consists of a wide range of critical skills and attitudes, and a Community of Practice must possess them in sufficient measure to achieve its objectives and to sustain itself over time. At the risk of depicting this range as deceptively simple, it comprises at least the following [group] skills:

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|--------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| • problem-solving | • decision-making | • project management |
| • organisational change | • process facilitation | • strategic and political |
| • task-related knowledge | • collegial leadership | • influence / consensus-building |
| • and technical skills | | • organisational / environmental |
| | | • understanding |

In addition, high-performance, self-directed teams and Communities of Practice rely on and operate around a shared set of values, principles, and assumptions (see, also, O'Donnell et al, 2003). That is, when they work well it is because they care about the same things, at least with respect to what they are endeavouring to achieve and how they will go about it. (Wenger (1998) notes that inclusion and engagement in things that matter to participants is a prerequisite for membership in a Community of Practice.) These are embodied in statements acquired during the course of this study like:

We are going to do it together, even if it takes longer.

If not us, who?

We have all the skills and abilities we need within the group.

It may be harder for me to do this part of the job, but I know I need to develop in this area.

We rely on one another to do our parts.

We know we're stuck. We're going to have to work through this and get back on track.

Organisational supports

The Communities of Practice project began with little more than optimism that COPs might deliver some of the benefits surmised possible through collective intent and activity. No such initiative preceded this one to anyone's knowledge; there were few pockets of related knowledge or skill on which to draw. There had been a short-lived drive to build campus community a year or two prior, but it had never gained momentum. There were also a couple informal interest groups in various faculties, with which one – teaching and learning – the author had been previously associated while at the business school. A recent university-wide restructure had disrupted these and other initiative and networks, and the dust was still settling at the time our project began. Naive in our grasp of Communities of Practice and the effort involved in creating and sustaining them, we hoped they would provide a sense of community to their members, contribute to work satisfaction, build career-relevant skills, and improve practice. After just one year, we are convinced that Communities of Practice have delivered in each of these areas, although not as we originally envisaged.

With six to twelve months of thinking about it under our belts, we launched the project in June 2006. A core team of six was formed to work with existing groups and to try to stimulate development of additional ones. We had identified ten groups that appeared to offer potential as Communities of Practice. These candidate groups had little in common. One group was comprised of individuals who had taken a course together on academic leadership and management, and were continuing to meet regularly. Some were project focussed, some less formal. Some were just beginning, while others more mature. Pre-existing relationships between members of the project team and one or more members of the respective groups was the primary initial enabler. We approached these groups with offers to support them as we pursued our study objectives. We didn't really know at the time what supports groups might need, and early forms were a mix of administrative, logistical, and facilitative support. Every group needed something different.

It quickly became evident that groups could come to depend on the core team project member (external facilitator) to make them work. This was precisely the opposite of what we intend-ed. If they did work but only with our leadership, we saw them as failing—not fulfilling what we believed a necessary attribute of Communities of Practice: self-governance. Our efforts, then, became building (or awakening) the capability within the groups to manage themselves. This involved both building skills and changing attitudes, and planning for transition from external facilitation and coaching to internal leadership. Refinement of this approach resulted in the development of our COP Development Model (Appendix B). The model not only characterises Community of Practice behaviour at given stages of maturity, but also incorporates the kind of external leadership / facilitation needed at the respective stages.

The entirety of organisational support in those early days was the core team. There was no organisation-wide promotion or major investment. No one on the core team was really full-time on the project, but at different times one or more of us was intensely involved. We

had envisaged that the notion of Communities of Practice would catch on quickly and that people would want to join or start up COPs. One of the things we did in the first months of the project to stimulate interest was to run a lunchtime seminar open to all faculty and staff on Communities of Practice. Amongst the thirty or so attending were perhaps ten who became involved in our project in one way or another.

That said, the notion of Communities of Practice did not take off in our organisation. Some of the COPs have exceeded their own and others' expectations; others still struggle. No new ones have formed to the best of our knowledge. The greatest achievement was the development of the SuperCOP introduced in the vignette above and its amazing design and delivery of a national symposium on Communities of Practice. Built on our experience, the symposium (or workshop) effectively showcased the merits of Communities of Practice and poignantly illustrated the challenges of forming and sustaining them. SuperCOP was comprised of a select number of representatives of the various communities with which we were working. They were, in effect, boundary-spanners, as depicted by Ward (2000). Building on Wenger's (1998) vision of constellations of communities, Ward describes boundary-spanners as individuals who are members of multiple communities. While multiple memberships have associated costs and benefits for the individual, organisationally they enable cross-fertilisation and leverage. We witnessed this repeatedly as one individual would take a new tool, practice, or idea acquired in one COP to another. There were many of these, from the way meetings were run to the kinds of topics entertained.

The SuperCOP was originally formed to support and leverage those individuals who demonstrated the highest levels of leadership to "kick start" the respective Communities of Practice. While this support and their efforts have advanced the respective COPs, the greatest gain is in the individuals, themselves, and in their collective, collaborative effort. While the national symposium provided focus and purpose for the SuperCOP, it has continued to meet following the symposium, and is likely to continue beyond formal completion of the project. In shared reflection and after action reviews, and adding to the rich data obtained from internal and external evaluation of the project and the symposium, in particular, SuperCOP members credit the process with a range of specific outcomes including:

- Seeing Action Learning in action, and developing skills of Action Learning / Action Research and collective inquiry.
- Developing collaborative skills, and especially skills and behaviours that support, not thwart group work.
- Enhancing facilitation skills, deepening awareness of what facilitators do and how they do it, and the vital role of facilitation in group work.
- Dispelling of the belief that group work is invariably frustrating and burdensome.
- Developing leadership skills and new leadership paradigms: *we're all leaders; it is our right and obligation to lead.*
- Sense of empowerment: *I as an individual can achieve more; I can achieve even more in working with others.*
- Deepening appreciation for and developing skills and discipline in reflection. Becoming aware of the role reflection plays in learning and, especially, collective learning and change.
- Providing the impetus to initiate or reinvigorate various projects related to practice improvement or enhancing community.

In addition to recognising these benefits, we see it as a positive signal that SuperCOP members are already asking, "what's next?" That so much was done with relatively little in such a short period of time is a testament to the potential of Communities of Practice. Little of this was planned and less resourced. It happened through some synergistic intermingling of in-dividual curiosity, continuous experimentation, relationship-building, and informal networks, along with some fair measure of prodding. Could it be replicated? We don't know for certain, but we certainly are more confident in the power of groups to organise, mobilise, and produce.

In summary, the lion's share of organisational support was directly to COPs through the aegis of initial facilitation and on-going coaching. As we worked intensely with various Communities of Practice and explored our own experience as one, we identified numerous areas where additional knowledge and skill would be an asset to COPs. This was articulated in a Community of Practice Curriculum. While the curriculum continues to evolve and be validated through application, it was part and parcel of the national symposium, and figures in the vision, purpose, objectives, and design principles of its concept document. Just one example of a particular curriculum area is facilitation. We learned early that facilitation was essential but that a Community of Practice must possess the ability to facilitate itself through and as part of the collaborative process. Therefore, we dedicated ourselves to improving our own and each others' facilitation skills – our practice. The symposium was designed so that participants would facilitate their own group work after an initial introduction by workshop hosts. The Communities of Practice at the workshop not only succeeded in facilitating their group activities, but learned a lot about facilitation and shared leadership in the process.

Making communities work

You can't make Communities of Practice work, at least not for long. They work of their own volition.

A note on community

The sense of community that membership in a Community of Practice provides may be the surprising, most pleasant outcome for many. While the best teams may provide this as well, the *community* in Community of Practice cannot be understated. It provides a refuge, a source of inspiration, a safe place to experiment and learn (see Dewhurst and Navarro, 2004).

Concluding remarks

A close look at the similarities and dissimilarities between high-performance, self-directed teams and Communities of Practice show them to be more alike than different. They tend to be different in the formality with which they are incorporated in the organisation. The former is officially chartered and its members assigned, whereas the latter tend to be informal groups whose membership is voluntary. Teams may have an on-going role and set responsibilities, whereas Communities of Practice may persist only as long as their members are getting something out of participation. They determine their own objectives and responsibilities, and are accountable to themselves and each other. They participate and contribute actively or less so, depending on their availability and level of motivation. Thus, volunteerism must be a factor in formation and sustainment of COPs, while this is less a factor in work teams. The more conventional the team (that is, the more formally and hierarchically structured and operating), the less like a Community of Practice it is.

High-performance, self-directed teams and Communities of Practice are most alike in their sources and nature of leadership and level and intensity of collaboration. They both demonstrate shared leadership and promote leadership development. Success depends on their ability to “self lead” (Manz and Sims, 1991; Taggar, Hackett, and Saha, 1999) and to collaborate effectively. This implies that they must possess or develop quickly a set of skills and attitudes that support collaborative work. In the traditional team, it is the team leader's responsibility to build the team, delegate and apportion tasks, solve team problems, including resolving conflicts amongst team members, and to ensure the team is aligned with and delivering organisational requirements. In high-performance, self-directed teams, team members are more responsible for these aspects of the job (Taggar, Hackett, and Saha, 1999). This is even more the case for Communities of Practice, which have no designated leader to set direction, prompt course corrections, or intervene to solve problems and resolve disputes. Consider the maturity levels members of Community of Practice must demonstrate or be willing and able to develop for them to succeed.

Given the challenge, why would people want to become involved in a Community of Practice? Recent experience has shown that members can derive much from involvement in COPs. Benefits include the chance to network, gain exposure to different people and work, learn new things and develop professionally, cultivate meaningful relationships, and increase job fulfilment. In relating their own research and review of other studies, Bartol and Srivastava (2002) identify a number of reasons individuals would want to join Communities of Practice. They note that employees want to forge relationships with others who have similar interests, and that they are driven to learn, fulfil their potential, and contribute to something bigger than themselves—the community. The sense of community that membership in a Community of Practice provides may be the surprising, most pleasant outcome for many.

Given these positive outcomes, organisational leaders may find the notion of high-performance, self-directing teams and / or Communities of Practice worthwhile. They may co-exist and teams can evolve into forms much like Communities of Practice (Zárraga-Oberty and De Saá-Pérez, 2006). They both offer the potential to dramatically change the nature of work and, thus, touch the work lives of employees and managers. Neither work form is for every-one or every organisation. They pose some amount of risk, and may be very disruptive (Swan, Scarbrough, and Robertson, 2002). Employees or managers may not be ready for such a shift in work design and responsibility (see O'Donnell, 2003, and Contu and Willmott, 2003). Cautions aside, if the organisation is in need of reinvention or reinvigoration, then these work forms can make a meaningful difference. The way forward, not surprisingly, should be a collaborative one [see any of the following: Turner and Crawford (1998); Bramson and Buss (2002); Grubbs (2002); Lines (2004); Iedema, Meyerkort, and White, (2005)], where the individuals who might be impacted by the organisational change and on whom its potential success hinges are the very ones who architect and implement the change (Hays, in press). In so doing, they are developing their capabilities to manage, lead, and interact effectively in a world where command and control management is a thing of the past, and where effective teamwork and collaboration are essential to contending with the chaos and complexity that define our times.

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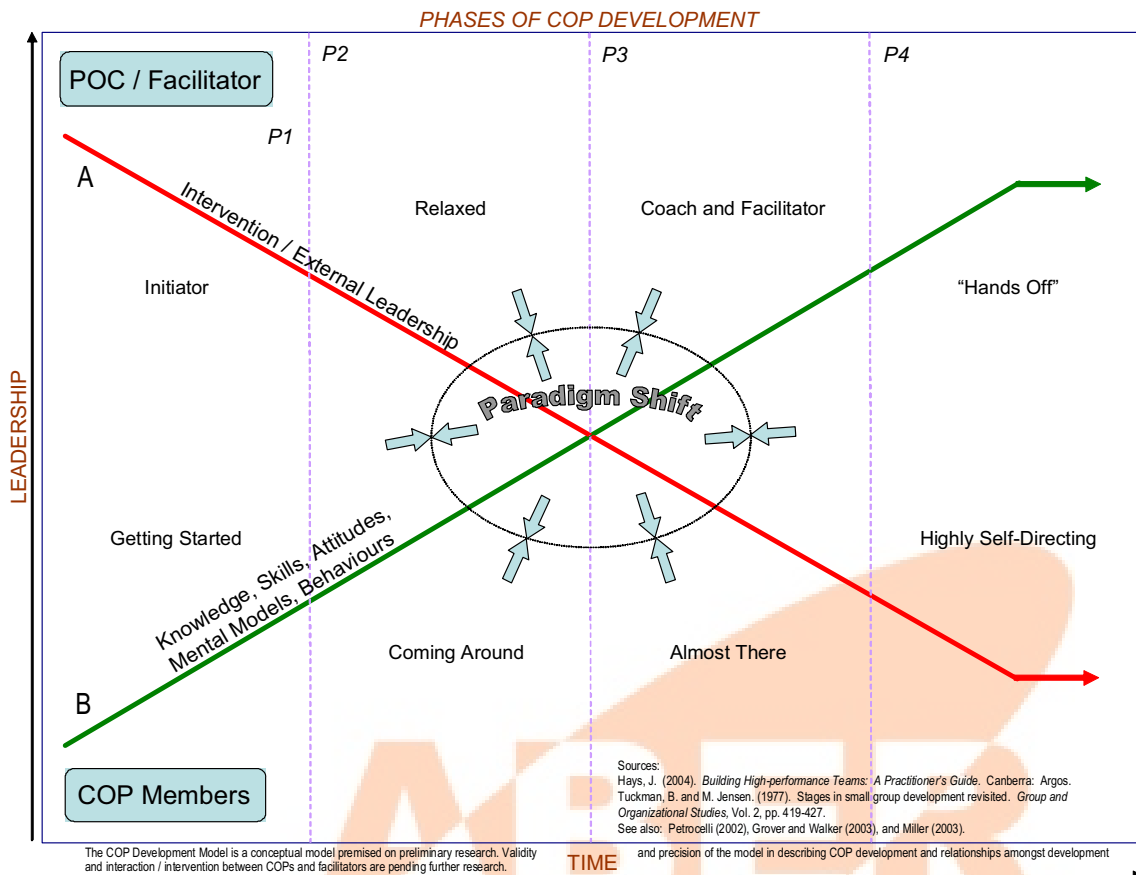
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Appendix a**A Quick Comparison of Teams and Communities of Practice**

Teams	Communities of Practice
Usually formally chartered by the organisation.	May be formally chartered or recognised; may evolve parallel to or in spite of organisational mandate or support.
Have a designated role and set of responsibilities.	Practice members define purpose and objectives.
The position within the organisation and relationships with other teams or elements are legitimate according to and defined by the organisational chart.	Probably do not appear on the organisational chart. “Legitimacy” may be questioned.
Members are assigned.	Membership is generally voluntary.
There is a designated team leader. Team members are considered subordinate to the team leader. Team leader is responsible for direction of team and resolution of significant problems.	There is generally no designated leader presiding over community affairs. Leadership resides within the group. Members share responsibility for community direction and problem resolution.
Delegation is key.	Self-determination is central in terms of what gets done, when, by whom, and how.
Team membership / participation is usually “full time.” First loyalty is to the team.	Participation varies (see XXXX with respect to legitimate peripheral participation). Members may be core or peripheral to multiple COPs. Multiple loyalties may exist.
Team tools and work processes are mandated. In the ideal case, they are congruent with and support organisational tools and processes.	Work tools, techniques, processes, and methods are organic, chosen and utilised by community members as they see fit. They may or may not align with those used in other communities or organisational elements.
Potentially empowered; empowered with limits.	Highly-empowered.
Legitimacy ensures sustainability.	Lack of legitimacy may present on-going challenges to participation and achievement.

Appendix b



Community of Practice Development Phases and Corresponding Leadership Behaviours

Getting Started

Thrashing, storming. Needing and looking for leadership and structure.
 -may not know or agree on purpose; competing agenda.
 -may have no agreed-upon, useful means of working as a group.
 -collaborative skills insufficient.
 -may know it's not working, but not what to do about it;
 Focus on "task" at the expense of process.
 Leadership amongst group equivocal, reluctant, uneven.

Phase 1**Initiator**

Provides most of the structure, direction, and guidance.
 Group might not survive without continued active involvement.
 Helps COP understand and determine content / task, develop objectives, make decisions.
 Directs and guides COP to clarify issues, challenges, priorities; and develop means for addressing them.
 Pathfinder. Director. Team Leader. Arbiter.

Coming Around

Sufficiently functioning as a collaborative unit to complete tasks. Gets the job done.
 -may not know they could do it better.
 -may work harder, not smarter.
 -may need some help getting through "breakdowns."
 Starting to choose their own course and work as a group to determine what they'll do and how they'll do it.
 Participation may still be inconsistent; work may be disproportionately divided.
 "Membership" (belonging) may still be a dilemma for some.

Phase 2**Relaxed Leader**

Provides some structure, direction, and guidance at his / her discretion.
 Active, Visible, Present.
 Provides coaching, facilitation, training, and other support as he / she deems necessary.
 Backing off on day-to-day leadership, but still needed to help the COP work through content (task) and process issues.
 Teacher. Mediator.

Almost There

Functioning effectively as a collaborative unit to complete most tasks with little direction.
 Showing concern for continuing to undertake new, more challenging jobs and to learn to work smarter.
 -members know what they might need to improve upon, and what they might do to improve.
 -members feel a measure of confidence, satisfaction, and competence.
 -Feelings of membership, identity, and belonging are high; mutual commitment to the welfare of individuals and group as a whole.
 Don't know what they don't know...

Phase 3**Coach and Facilitator**

Provides coaching, facilitation, training, and other support as sought by the group.
 Providing (or needing) little structure.
 Unobtrusive.
 Unnecessary to day-to-day functioning.
 Adapts to any role as sought by COP.
 Adviser. Guide.

Phase 4**Highly Self-Directing**

Initiating. See new opportunities and collectively agree courses of action.
 Correcting. Know where they've gone wrong or where improvements are needed, and take appropriate action.
 Learning. Continually evaluating performance and reflecting upon the process of working collaboratively.
 Effective. Work processes, methods, and tools are effective, but always under consideration for improvement.
 Collaborative. Work is fairly divided and everyone feels a valued contributor.
 Mindful. There is a conscious and continuing appreciation for, awareness of, and attentiveness to the developmental needs of individuals and the group as a whole.

Essentially "Hands-Off"

Non-Directing.
 Providing (or needing) little structure.
 Unobtrusive, Subtle.
 Unnecessary to day-to-day functioning.
 Adapts to any role as sought by COP, as long as it contributes to building leadership capability in the COP.
 Supportive, Encouraging.
 Counselor.

It's all leadership. It's all role modeling. Just appropriately different. →