Leadership Issues within a Community of Practice

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INTRODUCTION

Communities of practice are, and must be, fundamentally voluntary membership groups since they are about sharing of knowledge and expertise, something which cannot be effectively forced. Accordingly, no single person has positional leadership in a community of practice, as there is no formal structure in place to create such hierarchy.

However, wherever groups of people exist with any kind of shared task, there is leadership present, and leadership issues are repeatedly emerging aspects of the informal dynamics of that group or community of practice. It has often been noted that there actually is no such thing as a leaderless group. Informal leadership behaviours will come to the fore at certain points in any group’s life, whether consciously evoked or not (Tyson, 1998).

Given this scenario, leadership exists in a community of practice (CoP) by informal agreement and negotiation. CoPs usually find it necessary to designate a leader for purposes of coordination and clarification, and possibly for direction of communications and to help structure the group interactions. Leaders are therefore created by the ‘followers’, and have only as much authority as the CoP group is willing to invest in the leadership role. Much research has been done into the psycho-dynamics of group relations, and it is often said that we place a little too much emphasis in our investigations and our speech on the phenomenon of leadership, when we also know that leaders, especially of voluntary groups, cannot function without followers who ‘permit’ the leader to act on their behalf. Leadership and ‘followership’ are thus flipsides of the same coin, and one cannot be understood without the other. Perhaps we should therefore focus on the needs of the followers to see what kind of leader will help the CoP serve its purposes (Long, 1992; Hirschhorn, 1991, 1997).

In the CoP, leaders will aid the workings of the community and therefore be granted limited authority by the group on the basis of:

- charismatic personality,  
- superior expert knowledge,  
- outstanding breadth of knowledge (not necessarily a specialist or expert, but holding some knowledge of a wide domain of interest to the CoP),  
- high professional standing and reputation,  
- high capacity to organise and mobilise the CoP (i.e., facilitation skills), or  
- some combination of some or all of these aspects. (Tyson, 1998)

As with all voluntary groups, leaders with limited authority rely heavily on their capacity for positively influencing the work of the CoP and the interactions of its members. This influence takes the form of a number of leadership behaviours that are most likely to sustain the followers and keep the issue of leadership as a constructively assigned informal role. It is worth noting that leadership in this sense is a series of functions, and can be shared by more than one person. However, in order to avoid confused communications and expectations, a designated leader is normally more able to productively assign and direct other contributions of a leadership nature, setting in place a negotiated sharing of the role and functions.

The leadership functions of highest value to the CoP will be:

- balancing of members’ interests and articulation of agenda items for the CoP, including identifying priority rankings on certain issues;  
- attending to inclusiveness of the CoP, actively working at drawing in contributions from all members;