

## *Communities of Practice* A Cornerstone to a Learning Culture

James L. C. Taggart

*Genuine inquiry starts when people ask questions  
to which they do not have an answer.*

Peter Senge

Organizations embraced numerous concepts to improve performance during the 1980s and 1990s. These included total quality service, business process reengineering, quality circles, team learning (including outdoor adventure learning), and knowledge management. In the process, what has tended to be overlooked is the overarching umbrella of organizational learning, the process to create learning organizations.

In their book *The Dance of Change*, Peter Senge and the five other contributing writers talk about an “Organizational Learning Infrastructure.” Of particular note is that this concept transcends the team learning infrastructure, which Senge and his colleagues have argued was a failure in most organizations. People remain stuck in functional silos, for the most part, making it difficult to engage in collaborative learning.

The concept of an organizational learning infrastructure is founded upon *Communities of Practice*. Here, people work across silos, collaborating and learning together as they work towards a shared vision. The key driver is that they share a common purpose. But there also needs to be mutual trust and respect.

The process of creating and growing communities of practice is more effective at accomplishing results than past and current knowledge management efforts, which rest largely on the exploitation of information technologies. The latter can be characterized as mechanistic and quantitative attempts at capturing and codifying the corporate knowledge possessed by people.

However, much of the knowledge that people possess is tacit: the qualitative, contextual – almost amorphous – knowledge that enables people to do their work, often in spite of onerous organizational policies, rules, and procedures. What is important to remember is that this generation of knowledge is often done unconsciously and serendipitously. People learn through observation, listening, and doing.

This is where communities of practice enter. The members of a community of practice learn by working together. What they learn from one another is achieved through natural human effort and relationships. And it is for this reason that tacit knowledge cannot be converted or distilled to explicit knowledge. Senge refers to one researcher who made the statement: “I understand at XYZ corporation, the management says they are collecting the organization’s tacit knowledge. I hope they have a large bag.”

While some people may disagree with the above view on capturing knowledge, what is critical to remember is that we are dealing with human beings who cannot be codified or quantified. This is the power behind organizational learning with people in organizations: the nuances, diversity, perspectives, mental models, etc. make for intriguing, shared learning experiences. And these, in turn, create the synergies for enhancing an organization's capacity for new knowledge. Communities of practice serve as a cornerstone to realizing this state of *being*. Of most significance, this is where we see the emergence of a learning culture.

Ultimately, meeting the challenge of diffusion effectively depends on developing organizational cultures that continually encourage people to cross 'walls and stovepipes' (functional boundaries), not just to tell each other their news, but to inquire and come to greater levels of mutual understanding.  
(Peter Senge)