

Communities-of-Practice: Powerful or Powerless?

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Abstract

The extant literature provides evidence that control measures employed in Communities-of-Practice (CoP) have undergone significant changes with the evolution of the concept. When it started as a self-organized group, its members had the freedom to pursue their own interests. Now, CoPs are moving closer towards bureaucratic form of control. The paper argues that it might still be difficult to locate the power base in a CoP, but undercurrents suggest that they have a strong affinity for managements' interests. The paper also shows that CoPs can be formed intentionally, which is contrary to the common view that they emerge naturally. This seriously limits their autonomy as envisaged by the early proponents of CoP, who believed that closely knit informal groups would enhance situational learning.

Keywords: Communities-of-Practice, Power, Legitimate peripheral participation

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“In post-capitalism, power comes from transmitting information to make it productive, not from hiding it.” *Drucker (1995)*

Lave and Wenger, widely acknowledged for their contributions to the concept of Communities-of-Practice (hereafter referred to as CoP), had proposed that situational learning was the result of a process of engagement. Their proposition was, in fact, an outcome of the research carried out by Wenger during his doctoral thesis that later got published and eventually, went on to become a seminal paper on CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Wenger (1990), in his research thesis, had clearly articulated what he meant by the process of engagement in a CoP. “The basic argument is that knowledge does not exist by itself in the form of information, but that it is part of the practice of specific socio-cultural communities, called here ‘communities of practice’. Learning then is a matter of gaining a form of membership in these communities: this is achieved by a process of increasing participation, which is called here ‘legitimate peripheral participation’.” (Wenger, 1990, p. 3). On a similar note, Orr (1996) in his ethnographical sketch of copier repair technicians and Wenger in his later works (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002) laid the genesis for the development of the concept of CoP, which later became one of the influential research topics in social sciences. Surprisingly, there has been a decline in interest towards studying CoPs, evident from the decreasing number of academic and practitioner-oriented papers published during the last few years (Murillo, 2011). An educated guess at the beginning of this paper would be that COP has lost its earlier sheen and the top management has found better ways of controlling groups formed in line with the concept of CoP. It is also possible that taking note of this disinterest, the research community has discarded CoP for other greener pastures.

COMMUNITIES-OF-PRACTICE

Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of CoP had similar underpinnings with the early writings of Brown and Duguid (1991), who attacked the rigid and compartmentalized structures of the traditional bureaucracy. The bureaucratic form of control was based on Weber's theory of bureaucracy that held rational-legal authority as a basis for governing activities in organizations (Walton, 2005). In a bureaucratic control system, it is accepted that the employees give away their autonomy to their superiors in exchange of pay, thus, allowing them to be directed and monitored. An effective bureaucratic system can be created by specifying the rules of behavior and then, monitoring the output. This is exactly what Ouchi and Maguire (1975) meant by the two modes of organizational control - behavior control and output control. The essential element that underlies bureaucratic control is the belief that it is possible to measure performance using these two modes of control suggested by Ouchi and Maguire (1975). The irony is that control alone cannot be the only mode for measuring performance, as explained in the following example. A highly advanced research programme carried out by a group of scientists in a laboratory cannot work under fixed rules and constant monitoring of output. The bureaucratic mode of control is expected to fail in such a situation. Since the group in this context is expected to be innovative, communicate laterally and take up individual responsibility, autonomy of the group becomes crucial. Literature talks about 'concertive control' best suited for such groups (Tompkins and Cheney (1985) as cited in Barker, 1993). In organizations adopting concertive control, the control shifts from management to workers, who collaborate to develop their own ways of control. Based on a set of core values, the workers reach a negotiated consensus on the behaviors to be exhibited. The only question that remains unanswered in such delicate situations is the level of control possible in such a group. It then becomes clear that control should not emerge out of the rational rules and hierarchy in this case, but from a value-centered, concertive

COMMUNITIES-OF-PRACTICE

action of the members of the group (Soeters, 1986). The organization can exert control over such groups by carefully selecting able and committed members to the group, who would be self-motivated to achieve the group goals, in line with organizational objectives. The organization can also exert its influence on the group by rewarding those groups, which display attitudes and values that lead to organizational effectiveness. All the more, stability of membership would be an essential factor for the sustenance of such groups. The move towards forming such self-managed groups was a radical change from the authority based hierarchical structure that had been followed in an organization (Wellins, Byham, & Wilson, 1991). The self-managed teams were found to perform better than others since they exercised autonomy in their functioning (Haas, 2010). The historical account shows that autonomous organizations have worked more effectively in the past, too. Evan (1966) was one among the early scholars who brought 'autonomy' into scholarly limelight through his finding that less autonomous organizations possessed greater power. Hackman and Oldham (1976) found that autonomy results in internal motivation for individuals to perform effectively on their jobs. The situations which required higher levels of control for getting good results were found to work better with low autonomy (White, 1986 as cited in Brock, 2003). The empirical support for the premise that autonomous organizations work effectively even under high levels of control has been contradicted by the findings of Darr (2003), where sales engineers were found to exist in a sphere bounded by control and autonomy as conflicting organizational forces. Similar is the case with CoP, where management's direct intervention in controlling CoPs goes against the basic principles of full autonomy for CoP as envisaged by its proponents. CoP's have been described as tightly-knit groups that have been practicing long enough to have developed into a cohesive community, having a sense of belonging, commitment and a shared identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Brown

COMMUNITIES-OF-PRACTICE

& Duguid, 1991; Orr, 1996). The group of people involved in a CoP could be a network of surgeons exploring novel surgical techniques, a group of engineers trying to solve similar problems, a band of musicians seeking new forms of expression or a bunch of managers helping each other to cope up with the pressures. According to Wenger et. al. (2002), CoPs have “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p.4). In other words, when people in groups confront problems that are outside the realm of their expertise, they are forced to negotiate their own competence with the competence of others. From a power perspective, this is similar to what Baum (1989) says, “Power is the ability of different parties to achieve something together they could not accomplish individually. This power governs a politics concerned with creating new possibilities in a world where resources may be scarce but some interests may be joined and new resources created. This is win- win politics: victory is only collective, and one party’s loss defeats all” (Baum, 1989, p.195). Negotiating thus becomes a significant part of practicing in communities. It is precisely the reason why CoPs are referred to as participatory blocks where meaning is negotiated and practices are developed (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). In Brown and Duguid’s words, “the communities that we discern are, by contrast, often non-canonical and not recognized by the organization.” (Brown and Duguid, 1991, p.49). This leads us to conclude that the early view among the scholars was that CoPs were small, informal, and most often invisible to the outsider.

Let us now focus on CoP and the evolution of power viewed through the lens of Wenger. An interesting observation that needs to be highlighted here is that changes have enveloped the concept of CoP (Cox, 2005; Roberts, 2006) particularly the distinction between the more early conceptual works (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991) and the later sponsored CoP

COMMUNITIES-OF-PRACTICE

(Wenger et al., 2002; Wenger & Snyder, 2002). Lately, there has been wide resentment that the concept of CoP has undergone a fundamental change in its notion that CoP is now more of a managerial tool for improving organization's competitiveness. One does not have to go too far to verify the veracity of this assertive statement. A closer look at the works of proponent of CoP, Etienne Wenger, would be enough. In contrast to his earlier works (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1990), Wenger (1998) tilted his attention towards CoP in the formal organizational setting. Wenger's argument is that CoPs arise out of the need to accomplish particular tasks in the organization. "an effective organization comprises a constellation of interconnected Communities of Practice, each dealing with specific aspects of the company's competency" (Wenger 1998, p.127). His later works (Wenger et al., 2002; Wenger & Snyder, 2000) projected CoP as a tool in the hands of top management for improving organizational competitiveness. Thus, the concept of CoP has taken a U-turn from Lave and Wenger's (1991) initial conceptualization and it has shed off its autonomy to make it more subservient to the direct control of top management. Wenger's later works have been criticized for being "a popularization and a simplification, but also a commodification of the idea of communities-of-practice" (Cox, 2005, p.538). To borrow Cox's analogy, CoP has now become "a group of people working together to build a boat to anybody who is engaged in an activity related to boat building" (Cox, 2005, p.538). It becomes an irony in itself that any view of CoP as a community with defined boundaries and established behavioral rules was completely rejected by Lave and Wenger (1991). They had clearly articulated that CoP's do not have "co-presence, a well-defined, identifiable group, or socially visible boundaries" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.98). For them, participation in CoP was seen as, "an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means for their lives and for their

COMMUNITIES-OF-PRACTICE

communities" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.98). Wenger's (1998) approach towards power conceptualization was very different from Lave and Wenger (1991). There is a shift from an emancipatory discourse to managerialist discourse of performance in his later work. Cox (2005) says this shift from earlier participation in a CoP with an aspiration to enhance mutual understanding for purposes of emancipation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to participation in a community primarily preoccupied with improving prediction and control (Wenger, 1998) for the purpose of improving performance can be seen as a strategic move towards creating a bottleneck for the autonomy of CoPs. It turns out that mutual engagement and not informality is the essential condition for forming CoP's. Trying best not to contradict his earlier works, Wenger (1998) clings on to informality with an alternative view that the boundaries of a CoP do not have to match the institutional boundaries since membership is not defined by institutional boundaries. His claim for informality of CoP does not hold much value because he explicitly rejects the view that communities of practice can never have a formal status.

Research Propositions

There are mainly two types of membership in CoPs – open membership and closed membership (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Open membership means anyone in the organization who has genuine interest in the CoP's is free to enroll as a member. As Dube' et al. (2006) says, membership in CoP is more of a self-selection process because the members evaluate their benefits accruable through participation in CoP's. The second type, closed membership admits people who meet certain predetermined criteria. The powerlessness of CoP starts creeping in when the enrollment in a CoP is strongly encouraged by the management than the members' own motivation to join (Lank et al., 2008). In such a situation, the members have no other option than to toe in with the management's interests. The members cannot act in a state of refusal when there is a call to

COMMUNITIES-OF-PRACTICE

participate in a CoP from the management. The coercive power of the management would be at display while inducting members into such CoPs. The pressure tactics employed by the management to force someone to become a member of CoP is often underplayed to retain the informal aspects of CoP. There is no second thought that such CoPs will be strongly aligned to the strategic interests of the management (eg. increased performance or cost reduction). Research has shown that CoPs are sometimes amenable to manipulation and some scholars even recommend forming CoPs to suit the best interests of the management (Probst and Borzillo, 2008). The intervention of the management as a coercive partner can ultimately lead to the demise of CoP as members lose interest when their autonomy is completely withdrawn. If the management is bent upon converting the CoP into a formal organizational unit like a project team, CoP members may decline to be a part of such CoPs. The power given by the management to the CoP members to make decisions regarding who should be members, what should be their objectives, what are the deliverables expected of the CoP group, etc. is what thrives CoP. If there is a deliberate attempt to quash such powers, it would lead to the sad demise of CoP. We cannot rule out the possibility that a CoP that faces excessive control from the management might remove itself from the organizational radar and exist independently (offsite or outside working hours) to preserve its independence. Gongla & Rizzuto (2004) narrate the story of such CoPs which disappeared for more than six years at IBM Global Services. Thus it is suggested that increasing role of management in coercing its employees to formalize the functioning of CoP would eventually contribute to its winding up.

Proposition 1: The coercive power used by management to control the CoP would negatively impact the group's motivation to participate and result in the demise or disappearance of CoP from formal organizational setting.

COMMUNITIES-OF-PRACTICE

Now let us look at the leadership roles in a CoP. The most active one is the 'core group'. It consists of small group of members, constituting about 10-15% of CoP members. The core group has members who are highly knowledgeable, experienced and regarded as super subject matter experts. They play a crucial role in creating and sustaining CoPs. The active members, who are regular in CoP activities but not as active as core group members, form 15-20% of CoP members. The peripheral members rarely participate and mostly concentrate on practice development tasks (Wenger et al., 2002). The peripheral members should gain legitimate peripherality before they become active or core group members. The peripheral members' participatory legitimization is vested with the core group, who turn out to be the controlling nodes of the CoP group. Lave and Wenger (1991) views 'legitimate peripherality' as "a complex notion implicated in social structures involving relations of power... can be a source of power or powerlessness, in affording or preventing articulation and interchange among communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 36). This means that the legitimate peripheral participation is a source of power for the core group to allow or hinder access to or continuing membership in a CoP. The implication for this is that it becomes extremely difficult for an organizational member to become a member of CoP and start learning a practice, if power relations deny him or her access to the community. Lave and Wenger (1991) writes, "Hegemony over resources for learning and alienation from full participation are inherent in the shaping of the legitimacy and peripherality of participation in its historical realizations (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 42). Questions and conflicts arise when peripheral members gain expertise over the core group members. When the members move from the periphery to the core without legitimacy from core group members, the internal structure becomes unstable that may result in realignment or

COMMUNITIES-OF-PRACTICE

dissolution of CoPs. The boundaries would then have to be opened for negotiation and reconfiguration.

Proposition 2: The core group's expert power can have a negative impact on peripheral members participation, thus restricting the peripheral member's entry to active or core group.

Now let us focus our attention on how sponsorship influences the control-autonomy irony in a CoP. An increasing number of studies have deplored the role of management in constructing and supporting CoPs (Contu & Willmott, 2000). The argument in favour of denouncing such a move is valid because the CoPs started as spontaneous, self-organising and fluid processes that cannot be established by management (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Orr, 1996). A number of CoP's now have senior executives as 'sponsors' who initiate CoPs, decide their objectives, organize funding and continuously monitor whether the CoPs realize their full potential (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Research has also shown that sponsors now take lead role in identifying members for forming CoPs. The sponsor then strongly persuade these members to set up CoPs.

The sponsorship can act as a controlling agent for CoP through its mantle to decide funding for CoPs and by imposing governance mechanisms. Anand, Gardner and Morris (2007) and Chua (2006) strongly assert that management support in terms of funding and access to resources is critical to sustaining CoPs. Among the 'Ten Commandments' formulated by Probst and Borzillo (2008) for success of CoPs, the formation of a governance committee led by sponsor and CoP leader emphasizes the need for relinquishing autonomy for sponsorship. The purpose of the governance committee is to regularly assess whether the CoPs make strategic sense to the organization and to request the top management for funding.

COMMUNITIES-OF-PRACTICE

Proposition 3: The top-down approach with direct interventions of sponsor could have a negative impact on CoPs formed through voluntary participation and shared expertise.

Probst and Borzillo (2008) in their study, found that clearly defined strategic objectives would be a key success factor for CoP. Borzillo, Probst and Raisch (2008) narrate the story of a CoP leader at Daimler for stressing the importance of objectives for a CoP. “Too much leadership and pressure to pursue objectives could destroy the member’s spontaneity and creativity. On the other hand, weak leadership and vague objectives could increase the risk of members becoming sluggish” (Borzillo et al., 2008, p.8). This points to the fact that when the set objectives are too precise, members may start acting mechanically and experiment with lesser new ideas. Setting qualitative objectives becomes a control mode for the COP’s to function more effectively and the same gets echoed in Gibson and Meacheam (2009) words when they say that the good fit between objectives of the organization and focus of CoP would lead to its success.

Proposition 4: Setting clear and measurable objectives helps increase the member’s dedication to achieve the set goals with reduced autonomy.

Conclusion:

We have found that power in a CoP has undergone tremendous changes from the time when it was introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991). When it started as a self-organised group, control exerted was null and void, as the members were given freedom to pursue their interests. Now, CoPs are moving closer towards bureaucratic form of control with setting up of governance committees. There is a general feeling that the word ‘autonomy’ is a misnomer for CoP today. The power that once rested with the CoP group has been taken over by management in the form of sponsorship, goal congruency, etc. What appears as powerful in a CoP today is the sponsor

COMMUNITIES-OF-PRACTICE

and the CoP has ceased to exist as they used to be. It might still be difficult to locate the basis of power in a CoP, but undercurrents suggest that they have strong affinity for managements' interests.

The paper shows that CoPs can be formed intentionally, which is contrary to the common view that they emerge naturally. This seriously limits the autonomy envisaged by the early proponents of CoP, who believed that closely knit informal groups would enhance situational learning. The control exerted by the management has come to such a level that it becomes difficult to differentiate between CoP and a project team. The sponsorship provided by management in the form of resources, funding and personnel ensures that CoP toe the line.

The lack of empirical studies in CoP literature may be seen as a deterrent for making any generalized conclusions. But the fact is 'control' and 'autonomy' can only be understood through more case based qualitative studies. Hence the arguments and propositions put forward in this paper need to be seen from this perspective.

We end with a contradictory (yet supportive of our arguments) quote by Wenger (1998) that says, "The power - benevolent or malevolent - that institutions, prescriptions or individuals have over the practice of a community is always mediated by the community's production of its practice. External forces have no direct power over this production, because in the last analysis (i.e., in the doing through mutual engagement in practice), it is the community that negotiates its enterprise" (Wenger 1998, p. 80). An attempt has been made in this paper to understand CoP from a power perspective. Though this paper does not make a claim that it is a comprehensive analysis, but it does capture the basic tenets of power inherent in organizational communities of practice.

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