

Communities of Practice as Learning Enablers

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Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other (John F. Kennedy)

Projects are communities and as a community they are social organizations. You as the project manager are the leader of this community with the full responsibility of achieving success. To increase your chance of success requires the continuous search of knowledge and learning opportunities.

An avenue that can significantly assist in advance your knowledge level is the Community of Practice. As this paper discusses, Communities of Practice (CoP) can be a project managers learning asset.

CoP as a learning asset applies to all project managers. You might be a brand new project manager dealing with a small project team or, on the other end of the spectrum, a project manager with decades of experience dealing with very large and extremely expensive projects or somewhere in between.

Regardless of where in the project management continuum you fall, you might be faced with a project challenge where you wonder, has someone else solved this before and might have a better way to achieve the desired results? Do you find yourself wondering where you can obtain real world learning as you balance family and long hours of just working the project?

If you answered yes to either or both of the above questions, don't feel alone. Many project managers are in your same state of trying to advance their own project management skills and knowledge while trying to have a life other than just work.

So, be assured that you are not alone with your feelings and needs. In fact, your feelings and needs are firmly grounded in history. As Cleland and Ireland discuss, "Project management, as an important and growing *philosophy of management*, came into its present conceptual framework as a culmination of

experimentation with a variety of organization liaison devices."¹

Every project manager is in the experimentation pool that continues to evolve the philosophy of project management. This evolutionary process is based on the day-to-day individual project manager experience and academic research.

We, as project managers, try to capture this knowledge in lessons learned, published articles, and various presentations. Unfortunately, as practicing project managers we probably try our best to avail ourselves to the various learning opportunities but daily demands interrupt or inhibit our success.

So how can we learn as John F. Kennedy says, "*Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.*" As project managers, we are leaders, and in the position of leadership one must continue to learn. This learning is an interactive process which requires that those holding the knowledge are able and willing to transfer it to you.

While knowledge can be obtained from many sources research has identified a hierarchical knowledge structure. This hierarchical knowledge structure is based on;

Results from an extensive six-year-long research study at the Honeywell Corporation about how managers learned to manage revealed these clusterings: job experiences and assignments, relationships, formal education and training....

Experience is by far the most important opportunity for learning; this can be personal experience, reflecting on the experience of interacting with others, or formal studying... experience is the

¹ David L. Cleland and Lewis R. Ireland. *Project Management: Strategic Design and Implementation*. 4th Ed. 2002. McGraw-Hill. p. 22.

best teacher. Other people[’s knowledge] rank[s]
a close second... Pinto²

As we are limited in our time to face every conceivable challenge, the next best learning source is others. Communities of Practice provide links to others and links to learning through others.

A Community of Practice, by definition is “a group of professionals, informally bound to one another through exposure to a common class of problems, common pursuit of solutions, and thereby themselves embodying a store of knowledge.”³ Stated another way, CoP is “... where knowledge creation happens.”⁴

CoP’s can be local or virtual in nature. The local CoP may be your association with the company’s program office and other company project managers. Often CoPs are virtual where the individuals only meet on line in an asynchronous exchange of data, knowledge and ideas. An example of a project management specific virtual CoP is *asapm*’s CoP.

asapm’s CoP is a grass roots organization for the formation of the **PMCoP** (Project Management Community of Practice). This provides a mechanism for project managers to share their experiences and lessons learned.

In today’s business environment project managers are essential to many company’s success. To keep abreast of how to work better and smarter requires continually updating your skills and knowledge base. This can only be achieved through a continuous learning process.

Participation in a CoP provides the means to learn from your peers and assist your peers in doing better. Consider taking the time to join or even form a Project Management Community of Practice.

² Jeffrey K. Pinto. *The Project Management Institute: Project Management Handbook*. 1998. Jossey-Bass Inc. p. 250.

³ Thomas A. Stewart. *Intellectual Capital*. 1999. Doubleday. p. 96

⁴ Thomas A. Stewart. *The Wealth of Knowledge*. 2001. Currency. p. 266