Community of Practice…a missed opportunity?

Projects today operate in an increasingly global and connected environment. Traditional approaches to project management practitioner development have merit, but their limitations are well documented. It is now recognised that to be effective, project managers must supplement 'hard' or left brain skills such as scheduling and planning with 'soft' or right brain skills such as communication, influencing and negotiation. These new skills and competencies introduce new perspectives on learning and the type of education and training interventions needed – in respect of both content and mode of delivery. Community of Practice (CoP) I believe offer organisations such an option. But what evidence is there to support this view? Here is some from a study I was recently part of…..the name of the organisation involved – referred to as FinCo - has been disguised for obvious reasons.

The aim of the research was to investigate the connections between Workplace Learning (WpL) and CoPs within FinCo and to identify opportunities for improved practitioner development by making more explicit those linkages. Specifically it investigated the nature and structure of the FinCo CoP and tested the perceptions of a subset of the CoP members to identify ways in which the CoP might enhance its operation and its links – actual or potential - to WpL in order to improve individual and organisational effectiveness.

By way of a reminder, we defined CoP last time as "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 an area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, 2002). Hislop (2009) defines WpL as "the embedding of individual and group level learning in organisational structures and processes, achieved through reflecting on and modifying the norms and values embodied in established organisational processes and structures". Now let's look at some of the results (the research by the way comprised a mix of interviews and surveys). It was generally felt that the CoP existed for three main reasons:

1.   Facilitate best practice (47%);
2.   Provide information on PM best practice (24%); and
3.   Enable networking opportunities for members of the PM community (15%).

However, only 2% of those surveyed saw the CoP as forum for solving project management issues and just 5% reported that, when faced with a PM issue, they would choose to approach the CoP in the first instance. The majority (64%) approached another PM and 20% would choose to approach their line manager. In considering whether the CoP tackled 'real' organisational issues, only 14% believed that the CoP had a positive influence with the remainder believing that it did not – a shocking statistic. Similarly when questioned on how the goals of the CoP aligned to the broader organisational goals, over 80% believed that they were either not aligned, or they were not aware of how they were made to align.

In an attempt to explore this further respondents were asked if the PM CoP would benefit significantly in understanding the strategy, challenges and objectives of other business departments e.g. customer marketing. A significant 75% agreed that this would have a positive impact upon the membership – and the contribution - of the CoP. When views on the future of the CoP and the challenges that it faced were explored, the survey found that the most pressing challenge was to improve the knowledge transfer between its members. Coupled to this, almost 50% of responses felt that the management of the CoP needed to be more proactive.

In general, most CoP members believed that the primary purpose of the CoP was to provide an organisational grouping of the PM 'function' or resourcing capacity, rather than to promote PM best practice and behaviours. The FinCo community was geographically dispersed, fragmented and potentially incoherent. You could argue that as such it was more of a community by name, than by practice.

The literature tells us that successful CoPs have leaders that are 'practice focussed' (Wegner 2000) and that to practice critical reflection requires an appropriate framework in the workplace. Leadership of the CoP is first and foremost about 'facilitation'- ensuring all members have the opportunity to contribute to the community within the established framework. In this way, the CoP provides a 'safe' environment within which PMs can practice, enhance and refine their skills, such that when they are applied for real, it is with the benefit of such learning. The CoP therefore provides the means to allow community members to focus on tackling 'real life' organisational issues in their team environment - satisfying both the necessity for learning to be 'relevant' to the organisational context and, perhaps more importantly, to be at the level of the team operating within the work place.

So, what can we conclude? I believe that structured, systematic and strategically focussed P3M CoP provides organisations with a genuine opportunity to develop people and improve business performance. However, in order to exploit this potential, organisational leaders must seek to provide the necessary structure, guidance and support (the role of Dr Ed Hoffman as Chief Knowledge Officer at NASA comes to mind). This duality – learning from the 'bottom' and leadership from the 'top' – represents one of the most significant opportunities facing project based organisations going forward.