

Some KM practitioners believe successful CoPs shouldn't be created from the top. And it's true that management interference stalls many CoPs before they have a chance to succeed. But where does that leave executives who know informal communities exist in their organization and want to support them? Or those who recognize the benefits and want to try to form CoPs around the organization's key abilities? Here, CoP expert Richard McDermott explains how to form "strategic" communities that retain the "aliveness" of spontaneous ones.

BUILDING SPONTANEITY INTO STRATEGIC COMMUNITIES

Eight tips to put excitement into management-created CoPs

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In New Orleans, geologists and reservoir engineers who work on different operating teams meet regularly to think together about key issues in their work. Huddling over a seismic map, for example, they pose alternative interpretations, question assumptions, and argue for their views. In Boston, a group of social workers who staff a help line meet to discuss client problems. They guide and support each other through the emotionally difficult work of counseling.

The fact-driven, sometimes argumentative, meetings of the geologists in New Orleans are very different from the compassionate meetings of the social workers in Boston. But both are "strategic" communities, designed by their companies to give members a focused, but informal place to share ideas and help each other. This article describes how to design successful strategic communities that retain the "aliveness" that is more common to CoPs that emerge spontaneously.

Strategic communities build capability

Strategic communities differ from spontaneous communities in three ways:

- Their topic is typically determined by the business strategy, often chosen by senior management.
- Leaders and core members are often assigned with a percent of time allocated for community activity.
- They often have specific deliverables.

For example, Montgomery Watson Harza a global environmental power engineering and construction company, formed a community to develop the capability to bid on and execute design-build projects. At MWH, a small group of community leaders commit 80 hours a year to community activity. Deliverables often involve collecting current information community members have or codifying knowledge from members' experience. The design-build community developed guidelines describing the MWH approach to design-build projects.

Some companies have made CoPs the cornerstone of their KM strategy. Rather than simply depositing documents in a library, the community can organize and maintain the documents. Rather than maintaining expertise directories, the community can connect people in different teams or divisions to help each other solve technical problems. Rather than spreading best practices and new technology through management alliances, the communities – who understand how the practice really works – share ideas and insights with each other. Companies frequently ask communities to develop new capabilities, share expertise that exists in disparate pockets of the organization, bring new members of the field up to speed, or develop, organize, and share best practices.

Tapping into passion

Because they are commissioned, strategic communities can easily become more of a taskforce than a community. One company found that a third

KEYPOINTS

of the communities it formed in its production unit failed to survive beyond the accomplishment of their initial task. When successful, both strategic and spontaneous communities have an “aliveness” that makes them attractive to members. Members are genuinely involved in the topic, loyal to other members, and identify with the community.

But how do you design “aliveness?” Certainly you cannot dictate that people feel passion, connection and identity. Communities, unlike teams and other structures, need to *invite* the interaction that makes them alive, just as a park *invites* people to use it. Several principles can help community designers and leaders create this environment.

1. Focus on an important long-term purpose

While the design-build community began with a project to develop a set of guidelines, its purpose was – and still is – to develop the organization’s design-build capability. Many community members have devoted years to developing this capability, so the community appeals to something in which they have a great deal of personal investment. This purpose engages them at a deeper level than the community’s projects. Design-build is also important to the organization, so community members feel that the time they spend on community matters will be appreciated and valued. The purpose of most communities is not likely to ever be complete. MWH can continue to excel in design-build. Since the company sees that capability as a competitive advantage, community members develop a reputation for being on the cutting edge.

2. Design for evolution

Strategic communities, like spontaneous ones, evolve. They typically build on pre-existing personal networks. They change as new technology or science shifts their focus. A struggling IT community, for example, came alive when a key vendor introduced a new piece of software that required considerable collaboration to apply.

Design should catalyze communities to grow through the natural stages of evolution. Rather than introducing community tools all at once, with Web sites, portals, e-mails, etc. One leader started with weekly meetings, and once people were engaged in the topic and had begun to build relationships, the leader introduced other elements of community structure; a Web site, links to other communities, projects to define key practices, etc. Community design is much more like life-long learning than traditional organizational design.

3. Develop citizen leaders

Many small leadership roles sustain a community over

- Strategic communities differ from spontaneous ones in three ways: their topic is typically defined by the business strategy; leaders and core members often have specific amounts of time devoted to communities; and they often have specific deliverables.
- Like spontaneous communities, strategic communities need to tap members’ passion, personal commitment, and common identity.
- Strategic communities need to tap members’ passion, personal connection, and common identity.
- Eight design principles for creating strategic CoPs can give them the vitality they need to survive. These are not inviolable rules, but guidelines that identify leverage points for design.

time. The leader typically networks among members and sets the agenda for community events. But others take an active role. Subject matter experts lead thinking about their topic area. Senior members mentor newcomers to the field or division. Sometimes a very senior member takes on the role of technical guru, setting the overall direction of the community, but is not involved in everyday networking. When communities commission projects, some members assume project leadership. Some communities rotate responsibility for facilitating meetings and threaded discussions. Since community leadership is usually part-time, even for assigned leaders, and voluntary for most members, leadership roles should be small, and time-limited.

Community members need to feel a sense of ownership. Since community members offer their personal knowledge, participation is always a gift, not to the organization, but to other community members. To feel the community is worthy of the gift, community members need to feel it responds to their needs and shifts in directions they choose.

Sometimes this sense of ownership contradicts managements’ expectations for the community. Hallmark created a community of distributors and hosted discussions through a distributor Internet site. Once the community was going, its leaders asked Hallmark for a space on the site to which Hallmark would not have access. Management asked a newly-formed community of reservoir engineers to be responsible for quality control of individual reservoir engineers. The community turned down the

Designing strategic communities

Design principles are not inviolable rules. They are guidelines that identify the leverage points for design.

1. Focus on an important long-term purpose.
2. Design for evolution.
3. Design for citizen leadership.
4. Create familiar and exciting community places
5. Establish a heartbeat
6. Build personal relationships
7. Design for multiple levels of participation
8. Actively discover value

- request, noting that playing the “quality police” would be inconsistent with the spirit of collaboration they wanted to create.

4. Establish familiar and exciting places

To feel like an inviting place, strategic communities need boundaries. To create safety some communities ask that their managers not participate. Others insist that only real practitioners of the community’s topic participate. One community created a back room for senior staff to develop cutting-edge ideas that were contrary to current practice and policy. A scientific community in a pharmaceutical company formed an agreement with senior management that the community is a place to think, reflect and consider ideas too soft for the drug development teams.

Strategic communities need a boundary that separates the community from the urgent, output-driven focus of daily work. Because strategic communities typically cross organization’s boundaries, they rarely have their own physical place. Familiar places for strategic communities are typically meetings, teleconferences and Web sites.

But to be vibrant, communities also need exciting places. For example, a community of immunologists invited a controversial speaker to their annual conference, a Nobel prize winner whose ideas are respected by the community, but controversial enough to be challenging. The World Bank sponsors a knowledge fair during the Bank’s annual meeting. Conferences, fairs, and workshops focus the attention of the community outside its familiar circle, facilitating different lines of contact between people.

5. Establish a heartbeat

Regular meetings, teleconferences, taskforces, workshops, professional conferences, punctuate the ongoing flow of Web postings and e-mails. When events are too far dispersed, the community can feel sluggish. A community of library scientists had an annual meeting and a Web site with a threaded discussion. Not surprisingly, six months after the conference there was very little activity on the Web. An engineering community, on the other had, held a bi-weekly teleconference as well as several focused

face-to-face meetings during the year. In this community there is a flurry of activity on the Web site just before and after the teleconferences and meetings. The events give the community a beat around which other activities congeal.

There is no right beat for all communities. Some communities thrive more on face-to-face events. Others work well with a series of teleconferences or Web events. Generally a mix of regular events and unusual ones provides a sense of punctuation through time. A mix of whole community and small group events creates a balance between seeing the whole and developing more intimate relationships. Sometimes establishing a rhythm gives the community enough momentum to change and adapt to one that better suits it. But a sense of rhythm, whether discovered or contrived, helps the community develop.

6. Create a web of relationships

Rich relationships, not just great events, make a community engaging. Events make the community visible. They are the public space of the community, open to all members. Relationships give it heart. Much of the day-to-day community action happens in one-on-one exchanges, in “back-room” or private space of the community. Even in communities that hold regular informal problem-solving meetings, most connection happens person-to-person, through the telephone, e-mail and face-to-face discussions. In fact, a recent study found that e-mail is the primary IT resource used by most communities, even in companies with dedicated collaboration software. The leader of a community of geologists “walks the halls” between meetings, dropping in on community members, discussing current technical problems, linking them with resources inside or outside the community, identifying potential issues for meetings, and following up on others. When the one-on-one relationships of community members are strong, participants come to community events with multiple purposes: such as completing a small group task, thanking someone for an idea, following-up on an earlier conversation, or finding someone to help with a problem. Through this collaboration, community members develop a deeper understanding of each other’s thinking, style, and strengths. Eventually they develop a deep understanding of each other’s approach to their shared practice, a kind of craft intimacy.

7. Design for different levels of participation

Good community architecture invites many levels of participation. In a local neighborhood, some people are actively engaged in the public street, some

Designing for “aliveness”

Architects know you can design buildings and neighborhoods for aliveness. By mixing residential with restaurants, bakeries, and gift shops you can get people out on the street. By combining repeating, but inexact patterns, like a row of red brick buildings with different windows and doors of somewhat different sizes you can draw the eye down the street in a visually interesting way. By creating alcoves at store entrances, you can make a transition point in which people can pause, gather, and talk. These and other design elements make a neighborhood alive. If well designed, strategic communities can also feel alive and vibrant.

shopping individually, some sitting in pairs at a café, some walking to work, some may even be part of a crowd watching a street performer. Others are on the periphery, watching the action from the windows above the street. A vibrant community is very similar. People participate in communities for different reasons. Some because the community directly provides value, some for the connection and some for the opportunity to improve their skill. In a team you can expect all people to participate fully, to contribute their share. But people's interest in a community is so different that you cannot expect equal participation from all.

8. Design for member value

Value is key to community vitality. Since companies form strategic communities for a specific purpose, their expected value to the organization is usually given at the outset. But long-term community vitality requires tapping members' energy, personal time and passion. Even strategic communities need to provide value to their members or they will simply stop participating. The value a community provides to its members is often different from what the members originally considered. A group of systems engineers thought that sharing project proposals would be useful. Once they began, however, they discovered that the proposals themselves were not that helpful. In fact, it led to several poorly executed "cut and paste" proposals. What they needed was the designer's logic for choosing that software with that hardware and that service plan. This logic, of course, was not explicit in the proposal. The system designers needed to meet, discuss their proposals and unveil the logic that held them together. It's often helpful to discuss the value of the community early in the community's life. Several months after it started, one community made a brief discussion of value a regular part of its monthly teleconferences. Most community members were not able to identify any particular value when these discussions started, even though they all felt participation was useful. Soon one community member was able to quantify the value his team gained by applying a new technique he learned from another member. Another said the real value of the community was that he knew who to contact when he had a problem. Once these examples surfaced, other community members were able to identify additional value. When members are clear about the value for themselves and others, they often become more active and committed.

Strategic communities need "aliveness"

Well designed strategic communities have the feel of informal, spontaneous communities. They provide a forum for members to help each other

and, in the process, knit the organization together around key capabilities. Because they can shift focus and members can change their level of involvement, communities can fill in the gaps between teams and business units without running into the problems of matrix organizations. But because they place lower demands on their members, they risk losing members' attention when project teams or departmental responsibilities tug at members' time. They need to be exciting, alive places to hold community members' interest. When they have this aliveness, strategic communities, like a town square, can become informal public gathering places that attract members to help each other, share ideas, and think together.



Levels of participation

Vibrant strategic communities, like spontaneous ones, typically have three levels of participation:

The core group: This group is the heart of the community, but it is usually quite small, only ten to fifteen percent of the whole. They actively participate in discussions, even debates, in the public community forum. They take on community projects, identify topics for the community to address, and move the community along its learning agenda. In strategic communities, this core group often has specific responsibilities to make contributions.

Active members: Typically the active group is also quite small, another fifteen to twenty percent of the community. These members attend meetings regularly and contribute occasionally to community forums.

Peripheral members: Most community members rarely participate. Instead they stay on the periphery, watching the interaction of the core and active members. But they are not as passive as they seem. They apply their own insights from the discussion, having private conversations about the issues being discussed in the public forum. Some feel that their observations are not appropriate for the whole. Others feel they don't have enough voice to really contribute. In a traditional meeting or team we would discourage such "lurking" and "sidebar conversations," but because communities draw people with different levels of interest, successful communities build benches for them. They make opportunities for lurkers to have a semi-private space on the Web site, a community event. This keeps the peripheral members connected. Surrounding the community are people interested in it, though not direct members, such as customers, suppliers, and neighbors. Community members change levels of participation. Core members often slowly drift toward the sideline as the topic of the community shifts. Active members may be deeply engaged for several months, then disengage. Peripheral members drift into the center as their interests are stirred. To draw members into more active participation, successful communities create a fire in the center of the community interesting enough to invite involvement.

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