Teams and Communities of Practice (CoPs)

*Excerpts from Steve Denning's contributions to an ongoing dialogue
in the com-prac listserv – a Yahoo group.[1]*

1. Teams vs communities

People were discussing the distinction between a team and a community. I had tried to synthesize common usage and what had been written by Hackman, McDermott, Wenger, Senge et al, in the opening pages of chapter 7 of *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling* (Jossey-Bass, 2005), which can be downloaded from here
http://www.stevedenning.com/slides/Ch-7-taxonomy.pdf

I go along with the general usage that one difference between a team and a community is that a member of a team is generally selected by someone else - the team leader, or supervisor - whereas a member of a community tends to be self-selected. You join a community because you believe it has value. If you don't like what's going on there, you stop participating. (If the organization "selects" you to become a member of a community of practice, then I would say that we're really talking about a team or a workgroup, not a genuine community. Communities are inherently voluntary groupings.)

This has a bearing on a question as to how conflicts are dealt with in teams and communities. In communities, serious, unresolved conflicts usually end up with some members departing, and possibly the community evaporating.

By contrast, teams are established by the organization to meet a certain objective, and when conflicts emerge without being resolved, the teams usually stagger on, with the conflict affecting the overall performance of the team.

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[1] The piece is not intended to be, and does not purport to be, a full account of what transpired in the whole conversation at com-prac. The views expressed here are my views on a specific set of issues. If you would like to go to the full discussion, join the group and check it out at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/com-prac/

For more information go to www.stevedenning.com or steve@stevedenning.com

That said, I don't find teams per se to be all that interesting. They are part of a hierarchical apparatus of an organization. And as Richard Hackman points out in *Leading Teams* (2004), when you add up all the evidence, and all the peer-reviewed efforts to assess the effectiveness of collaboration, on average, teams don't perform any better than non-teams. Shocking, but true. One reason is that the effort involved in getting people to collaborate in teams is considerable. Another is that the extraordinary performance of high-performance teams seems compensated by the meager output of poorly performing teams, which usually do worse than individuals or people functioning in hierarchical workgroups. Overall - sadly - the net result of the output of the great teams and the poor teams is a wash, compared to hierarchical work-groups.

2. Teams vs High performance teams

Where things start to get interesting in teams is when you get to high-performance teams, which resemble effective communities because they both run on passion. There is fairly broad agreement in the literature as to the characteristics of high-performance teams which "actively shape the expectations of those who use their output-and then exceed the resulting expectations. They rapidly adjust their performance to the shifting needs of the situation. They innovate on the fly, seizing opportunities and turning setbacks into good fortune. They steadily grow stronger over time. The members grow individually. They carry out their work with shared passion.

Being a member of high-performance teams is a moving, meaningful experience: after it's over, the members tend to have reunions to relive 'those golden memories'."

While the concept of high-performance teams is fairly clear, good examples have not been easy to come by. That's why the example of the Inn at Little Washington in the current issue of Harvard Business Review is so interesting.

High-performance teams and communities also have in common an allergy to command-and-control interventions by management. You can't order people to become a high-performance team or become a community - actually, you can, but generally it doesn't work. Instructions and directives and sanctions tend to be counter-productive. Writers like Hackman conclude as a result that there's nothing much that a management can do to create high-performance teams except establish the basic conditions for teamwork and then cross their fingers and hope for the best. What he's overlooking is that there is a whole array of narrative techniques available to generate high-performance teams - and communities for that matter. Narrative techniques can inspire people to want to achieve high-performance or become a community.

3. Key principles of teams and high-performance teams

Here are some thoughts and pointers:

- It's easy to forget in a wonderfully collaborative listserv like this that, overall, when you add up all the evidence, and all the peer-reviewed efforts to assess the effectiveness of collaboration, *on average, teams don't perform any better than non-teams*. In practice, collaboration doesn't do any better than non-collaboration. I was shocked when I learned this in the book, *Leading Teams*, by Richard Hackman (2004). But Hackman makes a powerful case that it is true, and other researchers have come to the same conclusion. Hackman offers several reasons why. One is that the effort involved in getting our non-collaborative species to collaborate is considerable. (As a species, we're more like Common Chimpanzees than Bonobos!) Another is that the extraordinary performance of high-performance teams seems compensated by the meager output of poorly performing teams, which usually do worse than individuals or people functioning in hierarchical workgroups. Overall, sadly, the net result of the output of the great teams and the poor teams is a wash. On average, teams don't do better than non-teams! This ties in with Madelyn's point that collaboration is hard work.

- *Narrative is necessary but not sufficient for collaboration*. You need more than narrative to get collaboration, but it certainly is a key ingredient in getting to the higher levels of team performance. This is a point that several participants in this listserv have made, but a point that Richard Hackman, for instance, largely misses.

- *The sad fact is that high-performance teams are relatively rare*. As I look back over my decades of experience, I can recall being a member of many mediocre and poorly-performing teams. But I can only remember being a member of one indisputably high-performance team. (There are several cases where we were "getting there", but the team was disbanded, or I left, before the team reached a genuinely high-performance level.) Most people I talk to have similar experiences. High-performance teams are rare. Many of the contributions to the discussion on this listserv have been saying how wonderful great collaboration is when it when it happens. Yes, but the reality is that it doesn't happen as much as we would like.

- And *leadership is critical*. It's leadership of the team itself and leadership to whom the team reports, that creates the environment which enables the team to achieve a high level of performance. When you look at poor performing teams, it's often the context that is preventing better performance, not the team members themselves.

- I have met a few people who claim to have been involved in many high-performance teams, time after time, their whole life. My suspicion here is that perhaps these people are using a different concept of a high-performance team, perhaps confusing a team with a high-performance team. *What is a high-*

performance team? There is fairly broad agreement in the literature as to the characteristics. High-performance teams "actively shape the expectations of those who use their output—and then exceed the resulting expectations. They rapidly adjust their performance to the shifting needs of the situation. They innovate on the fly, seizing opportunities and turning setbacks into good fortune. They steadily grow stronger over time. The members grow individually. They carry out their work with shared passion. Being a member of high-performance teams is a moving experience: after it's over, the members tend to have reunions to relive 'those golden memories'." Often the discussion then proceeds: "Ok, that's fine, but give us an example!"

4. A high-performance team: The Inn at Little Washington

As it happens, there's a wonderful example of a high-performance team described in the March 2006 issue of Harvard Business Review. it's the Inn at Little Washington, where the owner gives a crystal clear description of such a team in action. He makes the point that serving great food isn't enough. To be a great restaurant he has to make sure that every table has a great experience, every time. How does he do that?

> *"... we instruct our staff to make eye contact with everyone at the table; a guest's refusal to make eye contact may indicate that he or she requires special handling. Waiters are trained to observe the group dynamics. For instance, are the host and another guest who is a self-proclaimed gourmet competing for control? Our waitstaff is asked to look for tension or unhappiness and to delicately ask questions, when appropriate, to diagnose a problem. Sometimes all a guest needs is a chance to vent his frustrations and to know that someone hears him, sympathizes, and cares. We train our waiters to readily apologize for anything that is making the guest unhappy. He had trouble getting through to us on the phone? We're terribly sorry. The drive took longer than expected? We are so sorry. It's raining? Again, our apologies.*

> *"After the guests are seated, the waiter assesses the party's collective mood and ranks it from one to ten. The score is logged into our computer system along with the order and appears at each workstation throughout the restaurant. Our goal is that no guest should leave with a score of lower than nine. If the table is already in good spirits, we may not need to do anything out of the ordinary. But if the prevailing mood is only a three or a four, the whole team works together to elevate it. The waiter identifies who at the table appears most irritable and treats him with kid gloves. If the husband is paying too much attention to an attractive waitress, we might change servers. In the kitchen, we make sure that no more than a few minutes elapse between each course, even if that means putting one*

table's ticket ahead of another's. If a guest can't decide between two entrées, we will sometimes send out a taste of the plate not chosen.

"With each interaction, the waiter reassesses the table's mood and transmits an update. Only at a five? We might need to send out an extra course. At a seven? Maybe an additional dessert.

"As our staff members work together to elevate mood ratings, they develop a wonderful confidence in their ability to handle difficult situations as a team.

"Even if a table reaches a ten, we don't consider the experience complete until the guests have had an opportunity to tell us their story—why they have come and what it means to them. That is when a personal connection is forged. Sometimes the nature of the occasion is obvious (a birthday or an anniversary). In other situations, extracting their story can take work."

Isn't that wonderful illustration of a high-performance team in action? You can readily picture how they operate, as well as understand the level of collective effort involved in operating at that level of performance, night after night, with good clients and bad ones, and also why such experiences are quite rare. As a customer or client, how many times in our life do we get treated like this? (Knowing now what I know now, the article does however make me wonder whether, on going to the Inn at Little Washington, I might not be tempted to enter the restaurant with a scowl rather than a smile. :-} Clearly, it's the squeaky wheel that get's the grease.)

Read the full article at http://www.stevedenning.com/slides/InnAtLittleWashington.pdf

The article brings out the key role of leadership in extraordinary teams. At the Inn, it's the owners who conceived this higher level of performance, who provided an environment that enables this kind of performance, and who help train and coach the members of the team to consistently achieve this level of performance. Quite inspiring.

One of the things we'll be exploring at the Smithsonian storytelling weekend is: what's involved in reaching that level of collaboration? Another interesting aspect about the example of the Inn at Little Washington is how integral storytelling is to the whole undertaking. It's not just telling the story. It's listening to the story, intuiting the story and then, if necessary, creating a new story.

5. Knowledge is in the White Spaces between the CoPs

I was asked what I meant when I wrote: "A lot of high-value ideas don't lie within the CoPs at all, but rather in the 'white spaces' between CoPs." Here's my answer:

CoPs can easily become part of the status quo, and just as much bastions of orthodoxy and preserving the status quo in their particular field, as the management hierarchy.

If a CoP has expertise in one field, it might well regard a disruptive innovation as a threat to its expertise, and something to be stifled, rather than explored and encouraged.

A historical example might be, say, a CoP with expertise in VCRs, which might have regarded a disruptive innovation like DVDs as a threat rather than an opportunity. Thus there might be no CoP in the firm in which the idea of developing DVDs could flourish and be developed. The idea is thus "in the white spaces between CoPs." If an organization is totally relying on CoPs to develop its knowledge, it might find that the most disruptive ideas with huge potential all fall between the cracks.

6. Does innovation lie in "true" stories?

I had written that stories about things that actually happened are generally more useful in organizations than imaginary stories. I was challenged as follows: "If stories are generally only valuable in a business context if they are consistent with the known facts, HOW can they foster innovation? Innovation is NOT a known fact, by definition!"

My answer: I agree that an innovation is a future story, and future stories are not about known facts, because the future hasn't yet happened.

But innovations, or future stories, need to be consistent with and compatible with the known facts and numbers.

The problem is deciding which numbers to focus on. Thus if you're looking at the introduction of a new innovation, like DVDs a few years ago, you were looking at a situation where the existing market for DVDs was zero (an important number) but where the potential market could be a great deal more than zero, and even larger than the then-current market for VCRs.

So you could have started to look at other numbers and stories about potential clients for DVDs, and what spending power they would have, and what interest they have in higher quality video, and whether they would be willing to switch, and so on, and thus try to make inferences about what the market for DVDs could be in the future. If it had been determined that a DVD player cost $10,000, then that would be a crucial number that would have a huge bearing on whether DVDs could replace VCRs: as it happened they were much cheaper, as well as better, so they are taking over VCRs, but still relatively slowly, as people had already invested in VCRs.

In one sense, the way this process works explains why numbers support the story, rather than vice versa, because it's the story that determines the choice of the numbers to focus on, not the other way round.

7. How management actions can actually help a CoP

This is not to say that any management action in relation to a CoP will lead to a contrived outcomes and death. The question is: what is the type of management action? If the

action is of the command-and-control variety, then this kills passion, and the result is often the death of the CoP.

But there is also a set of narrative techniques that managers can use that can enhance passion and encourage the CoP to improve its performance naturally. These techniques include:

- encouraging the formulation of the objectives of the CoP in narrative terms, so that the goals are clear but flexible.
- using narrative to shape the expectations of the clients of the CoP.
- organizing activities that involve members sharing their stories so that common purpose and passion emerge more clearly and so that members are energized by their participation.
- encouraging the CoP to tell develop and tell its own story.
- using narrative to persuade people (either the members of the CoP, or the leadership of the CoP, or the managers who oversee the CoP) to change the focus of the CoP to become more productive.
- enhancing group learning through the exchange of stories.

(These and other narrative techniques are discussed in detail, with examples, in chapter 7 of *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*.)

The point is that while command-and-control approaches lead to results that appear contrived, narrative techniques enable CoPs to evolve naturally and organically.