Building a collaborative workplace

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Today we all need to be collaboration superstars.

INTRODUCTION

Today we face an entirely new environment for innovation and getting things done. The days of the lone genius quietly toiling away in pursuit of that 'Eureka' moment to revolutionise an industry are all but over. We are now in the days of asking and listening to our customers and working with them in our innovation cycles. Innovation demands collaboration. So does production. In the past we could focus on a single task in an assembly-line fashion, handing our completed activity to the next person who would in turn do the same, until the job was finished. Now the jobs change fast, requiring learning new skills rather than merely repeating the old. We have to seek out people who have other pieces of the puzzle and work with them to tackle increasingly complex issues at a much faster pace.

In November 2002, a large number of 'atypical pneumonia' cases occurred in Guangdong Province, China. By July 2003, just seven months later, this new virus, known as SARS, had infected over 8000 people in 26 countries and resulted in 774 deaths. China's initial reluctance to share information is considered a significant factor in the rapid spread of the disease and the initial failure to control its spread. In March 2003, when it became obvious that SARS represented a global crisis, a virtual network of 11 leading laboratories in nine countries formed to collaborate in identifying the cause of SARS and how to combat it. The network was connected by a shared website, email and daily teleconferences to identify the SARS coronavirus. Research was shared in near real-time. Within one month, this international collaboration was able to discover the new corona virus that caused SARS and swiftly complete the genetic sequencing of the pathogen. It had taken the international community three years to discover that HIV led to AIDS. Identifying the cause of SARS led to an understanding of its modes of transmission, and enabled the development of guidance for managing the outbreak.

Today we all need to be collaboration superstars. The trouble is, collaboration is a skill and set of practices we are rarely taught. It's something we learn on the job in a hit-or-miss fashion. Some people are naturals at it, but most of us are clueless.

Our challenge doesn't stop there. An organisation's ability to support collaboration is highly dependent on its own organisational culture. Some cultures foster collaboration while others stop it dead in its tracks.

To make matters worse, technology providers have convinced many organis- ations that they only need to purchase collaboration software to foster collabo- ration. There are many large organisations that have bought enterprise licences for products like IBM's Collaboration Suite or Microsoft's Solutions for Collaboration who are not getting good value for money, simply because people don't know how to collaborate effectively or because their culture works against collaboration.

Of course technology plays an important role in effective collaboration. We are not anti-technology. Rather we want to help redress the balance and shift the emphasis from merely thinking about collaboration technology to thinking about collaboration skills, practices, technology and supporting culture. Technology makes things possible; people collaborating makes it happen.

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This paper has three parts. We start by briefly exploring what we mean by collaboration and why organisations and individuals should build their collaboration capability. Then, based on that understanding, we lay out a series of steps for developing a collaboration capability. We finish the paper with a simple test of your current collaboration capability.

WHAT IS COLLABORATION?

Think back to a meeting when you had a handful of people gathered around a whiteboard and one person is drawing and talking, explaining what she means. In mid flight, a colleague grabs another pen and adds to the drawing, suggesting another perspective. A new train of thought emerges. Everyone pitches in and the conversation is electric with ideas, and with each word progress is made toward their common objective.

How about when you had a thorny problem at work and remembered someone from your professional association who had talked about a similar problem? You decide to go to the monthly meeting and seek advice, and come back charged up with fresh new ideas from others in the community.

Today, we can cast our collaboration net even wider by putting a query online and get answers back from people we don't even know. And they can be good answers. Just look at the network of programmers contributing to Open Source programs, or the wealth of knowledge poured into Wikipedia. We can forge new alliances beyond the walls of our own organisations.

> When Mark was working for an engineering firm in 2005, an engineer in Perth was asked by his Department of Defence client, "What risk management software is Defence using?". Defence is so big even Defence employees don't know what they are using. There were many other engineers from this firm working in Defence across Australia, so the employee posted a message to the organisation's project management list server. Everyone interested in project

management within the firm received the email. Within an hour he had responses from three other colleagues, advising that Defence was reviewing its risk management software and was likely to adopt a new standard risk management application within a few months. Coincidentally, the firm had worked on the evaluation of the new software and a copy of the evaluation was provided. In February 2006, another engineer posted a message to the group, advising that the new software standard had been formally adopted. The client in Perth was impressed at the comprehensive, timely and accurate information the consulting organisation was able to provide.

Collaboration is a process through which people who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible.[1] And today it's more than groups of people working together as teams and communities. Collaboration generates new ideas and new solutions that emerge from the interplay of these perspectives, experience and knowledge that help us get work done, coming from people both inside and outside an organisation, well-known and, yes, even strangers. We can have long-lasting collaboration—or short-term, formal or ad-hoc.

THREE TYPES OF COLLABORATION

Older models of collaboration tended to focus on teams and formal, structured collaboration. We have more options now. Here we explore three types of collaboration and how we might approach them as an organisation.

In **team collaboration**, the members of the group are known, there are clear task interdependencies, expected reciprocity, and explicit time-lines and goals. To achieve the goal, members must fulfil their interdependent tasks within the stated time. Team collaboration often suggests that, while there is explicit leadership, the participants cooperate on an equal

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footing and will receive equal recognition. An example is a six-member team working together to develop a new marketing strategy in a month, with a defined set of resources. Team collaborations can also occur with external partners, but there is always a clear mandate and defined roles.

In **community collaboration**, there is a shared domain or area of interest, but the goal is more often focused on learning rather than on task. People share and build knowledge rather than complete projects. Members may go to their communities to help solve their problems by asking questions and getting advice, then taking that advice back home to implement in their teams. Membership may be bounded and explicit, but time periods are often open or ongoing. Membership is often on equal footing, but more experienced practitioners may have more status or power in the community. Reciprocity is within the group, but not always one to one ("I did this for you, now you do this for me"). An example might be a community of practice that is interested in the type of marketing mentioned in the team example above. A member of that team may come to her community and ask for examples of past projects.

> Rio Tinto's Bengalla mining operation is located in the Hunter Valley in Australia. One of the operation's fleet of bulldozers had an intermittent problem with the brakes failing. This was a serious safety issue and months of effort were expended trying to resolve the issue—without success. The mine superintendent was on the verge of removing this multi-million dollar machine from operations when he decided to look more widely for a solution. On 18 January 2007 he posted a message to Rio Tinto's collaborative forum, outlining the situation and seeking assistance. The following day, an engineer in California replied with a comprehensive solution to the problem… a problem they had battled with for over a year before finding resolution. "We had the same problem… it'll drive you nuts." The solution was applied and the dozer was returned to normal operations.[2]

Community collaborations may also give rise to more formalised team collaborations. As people get to know each other, they can identify good fits for team members and draw new talent into their teams.

Network collaboration steps beyond the relationship-centric nature of team and community collaboration. It is collaboration that starts with individual action and self-interest, which then accrues to the network as individuals contribute or seek something from the network. Membership and time-lines are open and unbounded. There are no explicit roles. Members most likely do not know all the other members. Power is distributed. This form of collaboration is driven by the advent of social media (tools that help us connect and interact online), ubiquitous internet connectivity and the ability to connect with diverse individuals across distance and time. It is a response to the overwhelming volume of information we are creating. It's impossible for an individual to cope on their own. So networks become mechanisms for knowledge and information capture, filtering and creation.

An example of network collaboration might be members of the team in the first example above bookmarking websites as they find them, using a shared or 'social bookmarking' tool. This benefits their team, and possibly their related communities of practice if they are also sharing bookmarks. But it also benefits the wider network of people interested in the topic. At the same time, team members may find other bookmarks left by network members relevant to their team work. This sort of network activity benefits the individual and a network of people reciprocally over time. The reciprocity connection is remote and undefined. You act in self-interest but provide a network-wide benefit.

How is your collaboration culture?

Here are 15 true/false questions you can answer to give you an idea of just how collaborative your organisation is today, or whether your organisational culture needs work.

TEAM

	True	False
• You enter into collaborations as peers, with each person playing a valued role?	☐	☐
• Teams are recognised and celebrated as a unit?	☐	☐
• People enter into collaborations with a feeling of promise?	☐	☐
• There is someone in your organisation you can talk to, to learn more about effective collaboration approaches?	☐	☐
• You have access to relevant and useful collaboration technologies and are encouraged to use them?	☐	☐

COMMUNITY

	True	False
• There are other people in the organisation who have similar interests and passions with whom you connect regularly to learn from each other?	☐	☐
• Your organisation actively supports communities of practice?	☐	☐
• The conversations that your community is having are engaging and help you do a much better job?	☐	☐
• Your community is coordinated by a passionate individual, supported by a small group who really care about the existence ofthe community?	☐	☐
• Managers see the value of participating in your community and actively support your attendance?	☐	☐

NETWORK

	True	False
• More than half the organisation are bookmarking and tagging web-pages?	☐	☐
• People can recount stories of how they found information from someone else's bookmarks that made a significant contribution to their work?	☐	☐
• New communities have formed based on the realisation that people were interested in similar topics?	☐	☐
• The organisation actively supports the use of network collaboration technologies such as social bookmarking, blogs, wikis, tagging and RSS?	☐	☐
• Senior leaders are using network collaboration technologies?	☐	☐

Give yourself 1 point for each time you answered True. Add up your points.

15 points: Collaboration nirvana. If you like working with high performance teams, communities and networks, never leave this organisation.

11-14 points: Damn good. Lots of opportunities to tackle complex problems and achieve tremendous results.

5-10 points: So-so. Things are getting better and the signs of life are there.

1-4 points: Dismal. Most of the time the hero sweeps in on his white steed and saves the day and receives all the glory, despite all the hard work that everyone else actually did.

0 points: Collaboration hell. If collaboration is your thing, why are you still here?

COLLABORATION SUCCESS FACTORS

Our experience tells us of certain factors for success in all three types of collaboration. That said we have also been surprised in cases where success factors were missing or even operated counter to our expectations, yet the collaboration was successful. So we offer these lists in the spirit of those things we believe are important, but they are neither definitive nor comprehensive. Our purpose is to provide an understanding of the type of culture required to support collaboration.

TEAM

- Common purpose or goal
- An outcome that is valued
- Pressure to deliver (a due date)
- Complex problems that a single person could not resolve on their own
- An explicit process for getting things done (no ESP required)
- Clearly defined roles
- Knowledge of each other's work, communication and learning styles
- An admiration of the skills and abilities of fellow team-mates
- Enough resources to do the job but not so many that the team loses its resourcefulness
- Regular social activities to build trust among team members.

COMMUNITY

- A topic that members care about to a point where their identity is wrapped up in that topic
- A community coordinator who can orchestrate activities, introductions and opportunities for learning
- Regular social activities to build trust and new social connections among team members
- Opportunities to practise and gain experience, or vicariously gain experience by hearing the stories of other practitioners

- Leaders who see value in the community and at best encourage their staff to participate and at worst don't discourage community participation
- Strong executive sponsorship providing legitimacy, resources and a helping hand when things get political
- A core group of community members that care about the group and provide direction and enthusiasm for its activities
- A handful of members who are connectors, helping people find each other in the community
- Regular meetings to help establish the community's rhythm
- Appreciation for the periphery, which may be silent but is learning and carrying community learnings out to the world
- Members who belong to related communities, who bring in and take out ideas and information (pollinators and connectors).

NETWORK

- Technology to store and retrieve information of interest which makes it immediately findable to everyone in the network
- An appreciation of how effective use of social technology, such as bookmarking, will save time and assist team and community collaborations
- Having diverse skills in the organisation—scanners, filterers, connectors—who help make sense of information and connections from the network and bring them back into the flow of organisational work. Not everyone has to do this, but enough people need to
- A tolerance for a high volume of information—knowing that you can catch what you need from the flow, but you can't drink the entire river
- Ability to see connections across diverse signals and bits of information
- Connections between teams, communities and their larger networks as sources of new ideas and members.

Our experience tells us of certain factors for success in all three types of collaboration.

A shorthand for this list is, "How does one get ahead around here?". In the collaborative age, it is about creating the conditions so we can answer the question, "How do WE get ahead around here?".

UNDERSTANDING YOUR COLLABORATION CULTURE

Does your organisation have a culture that works for the team, community and network types of collaboration? Or are you fighting against a culture that stifles collaboration? Stifling culture may include a singular focus on individual achievement, a culture that does not value sharing knowledge or expertise, or simply ignoring the network.

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

Leadership is a keystone for establishing supportive collaboration cultures, especially in teams and communities. This is based on how leaders mainly embed their beliefs, values and assumptions in the fabric of their organisation. There are six main behaviours that leaders display that mould the organisation's culture.[3]

- What leaders pay attention to, measure, and control on a regular basis—are they paying attention to collaborative strategies and behaviours from team, community and network perspectives?

- How leaders react to critical incidents and organisational crises—are they sacrificing long-term goals for short-term fixes which sabotage collaboration? Does fear of connecting to the larger network keep them from tapping into it?

- How leaders allocate resources—are they investing in the collaboration capability? Is it attentive to all three types of collaboration?

- How leaders express their identity through deliberate role modelling, teaching, and coaching—as our leaders collaborate, so do we!

- How leaders allocate rewards and status —are your leaders rewarding individual or collaborative behaviours? Or both?

- How leaders recruit, select, promote, and excommunicate—are collaborative talents sought and nurtured?

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The best way to foster a value is by example. Here's an instance of how leaders can demonstrate that they value collaboration. Leaders need to change their behaviour so that these types of stories circulate within their own organisations.

An Australian pharmaceutical organisation faced a major dilemma. The Swedish arm of the organisation had advised that a key drug would be in limited supply for a considerable period. This drug was a life-saving antibiotic used in intensive care to treat severe infections. "If you are an intensive care physician and you need it, you don't want to be told that there is none on the shelf." The GM insisted that company employees be proactive and engage with their customers to tackle the issue. Sales, marketing and national accounts all worked together to develop a strategy based on identifying the hospitals most at risk. First action was to engage with Sweden to examine global issues and to get an adequate allocation of the available stock. Next, "we phoned over a hundred directors of pharmacy and intensivists and had a discussion with them to identify needs and how they might change their internal protocols to use the available production as effectively as possible. They were really appreciative of the engagement." The organisation had lots of positive feedback… "We hated the fact that you were out, but we really appreciated the fact that you bothered to talk to us beforehand." Staff involved in the issue described how "our GM led the way, engaging with everyone and making sure everything was kept out in the open, despite others insisting that we 'keep it quiet'. At the same time there was another example with a competitor: the pharmacists and clinicians told us, 'We didn't find out about this until six weeks after the fact'. So it was a good example of a global action, local action at the hospital and also internally coordinating those activities."

TEAM CULTURE

Team collaboration requires a culture that values and supports specific interdependencies between people. In other words, we look out for each other and we can't succeed without each other. Do your organisation's teams have clarity around the following?:

- **Priorities** – team success over or in alignment with individual performance
- **Targets** – delivering outcomes on time, to budget and to specification
- **Learning** – learning from within and across teams:
  – honest, constructive feedback
  – knowledge sharing, not hoarding
- **Explicit team processes:**
  – communications
  – working and work flow
  – identity-focused role clarity
  – decision-making.

COMMUNITY CULTURE

Much community collaboration is voluntary, so the issues of status and reputation carry a different weight than within teams and formal organisational structures. Communities can be challenged because they don't have the 'stick' of 'do this work or you won't get paid', and the status of organisational role may not be relevant. So community leaders often lead from their own passion. They either gain the support of members, or they are rejected. Members engage and build their own reputation through contribution, which may later indirectly reflect back in their rise within the organisation. Some things to examine in your organisation's community collaboration culture include:

- Are there incentives or rewards for participation in communities or in addition to one's team roles? Are there disincentives?
- Do people have time to participate in communities or are they only 'on your own time'? If the latter, how do you convert that knowledge and participation back into your organisation's goals?

- Is there clarity about what information is ok to share from teams to communities?
- Is the community there to support people who wish to enhance their craft, or is it merely an organisational initiative for sharing knowledge that people are instructed to attend?

NETWORK CULTURE

Networks are reliant on stimulation of various points or nodes rather than centralised leadership. A need is expressed and, somewhere, someone in the network who can respond to that need replies. Some factors to consider in supporting network collaboration in your organisation include:

- Network collaboration is reliant on the sending and noticing of signals around issues of shared interest. How do employees attend to this sending and receiving in ways that are useful to the organisation?
- With information overload, the ability to filter and scan the messages that fly across a network is critical, from both a tool and a skill perspective. Have those who are good at this in your organisation been identified? Are they given time and support to play this role?
- Identity and trust manifest differently in networks, where identity is more about what you know than who you are, and trust is about consistent delivery and quality rather than a personal sense of trust and one-to-one reciprocity. In other words, you can trust someone without getting to know them. Are employees in your organisation aware of and using this distinction to best participate in relevant networks? Are they rewarded for participation that builds their network reputation?
- Networks can raise the profile of employees and so create a perceived or real threat of their being poached by other organisations. Are key employees being rewarded so they don't WANT to leave? Bright stars will shine, so leaders had better be aware of the danger and be proactive!

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- Networks can make leaders feel as though they have nothing to lead. Individuals can easily bypass nodes in the network that they don't care to interact with, making one person a leader to some and irrelevant to others. So leadership becomes distributed and embodied in the actions of each individual. How does your leadership culture (noted above) work with this distributed leadership style in network culture?

A FEW WAYS TO STRENGTHEN THE COLLABORATION CULTURE

Today's organisations can consider not only how to support traditional team-based collaboration, but can also adopt community and network collaboration where it serves their needs. Many of the things you can do can echo across all three types of collaboration, while some are unique to one type. Here are some possibilities.

A. FOSTER COLLABORATION LEADERSHIP AND SUPPORT

Establish a collaboration coordinator

Establishing a collaboration capability requires someone to foster its development.

Establishing a collaboration capability requires someone to foster its development. People would think you're crazy if you suggested an organisation establish a sales capability without sales people, or a human resources capability without an HR team. Yet we have seen many examples of organisations seeking to enhance their collaboration capability without identifying or resourcing people responsible for developing and nurturing it. Wishful thinking is not enough. Giving the role of collaboration coordinator as an 'extra task' to people who are already good collaborators can have unintended negative consequences, such as sending the message that the reward for being a good collaborator is getting more work to do. So time and resources must be allocated to the role, even if you start small. In fact, Peter Block is fond of saying that the projects that best succeed are the ones that are 'slow, small and underfunded'. We reinterpret this to mean, 'think in small steps, iterate and grow as you learn'.

The role of the collaboration coordinator

(evangelist, manager, specialist—the title doesn't really matter) could include:

- Finding opportunities in the organisation where better collaboration would make a difference to the quality of products and services, the speed of delivering these products and services to clients, and the ability to use a diversity of ideas and approaches to ferret out good collaboration practices and tools
- Connecting people and ideas so new collaborations can flourish
- Helping people to learn and adopt collaboration practices and tools
- Collecting stories of how collaboration really works, for the times you need to justify the role
- Keeping up to date with the field of collaboration.

Build a group of collaboration supporters

The collaboration coordinator can't do this job alone, so she should gather a group of supporters to help. Here is how the US Defense Intelligence Agency did it.[4]

Following 9/11, US intelligence agencies reassessed the way they worked, and the US Defense Intelligence Agency embarked on a culture-change project aimed at developing the Agency as a knowledge-based organisation. The approach was based on three principles: 1) the change mechanism needed to exist outside the line management, because the current culture would thwart innovation, but at the same time the project needed sponsorship; 2) a focus on practice and making a difference to the people doing the real work; and 3) working in a climate of limited funds.

Their solution was network-based. Each of the 27 divisions nominated a person to join a cooperative (called the Knowledge Lab), which would champion knowledge-based change. The Knowledge Lab leader interviewed each nominee, and the successful candidates then identified five to ten peers in their division to support them. This created a network of 119 change agents. The Knowledge Lab conducted a social network analysis with its members to find out the connectors, bridges and peripherals in DIA's 8000 strong workforce.

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The Knowledge Lab is conducting a series of pilot projects, and has seen some remarkable changes and the formation of new social networks.

Collaboration supporters are your best option for tapping into the full power of both team, community and network collaboration. And they use a variety of skills and talents. So pay attention to what each person can bring and channel them into the area where they can best make a difference. For example:

- People with strong project-management and strategic skills can be strong supporters of team processes and thus team collaboration. These are the people who like to focus on one thing at a time and support progress towards a defined goal.

- People who are curious and want to build their personal knowledge and identity in their fields, are often interested in community participation as a way to attain these goals. People who are good 'people connectors' can also bring tremendous assets to both community and network collaboration.

- People who are curious, global thinkers, who can scan and connect people and ideas, are great network collaborators. They are often the 'bridgers' who bring ideas into the community or team from the network and carry out ideas to test and evaluate. They don't seem to be fazed by the flow and volume of network information.[5]

Recruit and promote collaborative people

We used to recruit people based on their university degrees and years of experience in a specific field. Now, in the days of rapidly shifting work and knowledge, we need to recruit learners and collaborators.

- What are key indicators to look for when hiring?
- How do you measure 'collaborativeness'?
- What is the balance of promoting individual and/or group behaviours (i.e. what about free riding?)

B. COMMUNICATE THE FRUITS OF COLLABORATION

Initiate communication with leaders

Don't wait for the boss to ask for documentation of collaboration success, especially if they have invested in collaboration. Coordinators should start by telling success stories to senior leaders, then back these up with reasoning and data. Use the context of a story to engage. Leading with data and reasoning reinforces current ideas about the utility of collaboration, which is fine if those ideas are positive. But if you need to convince people of the value of collaboration, starting with the stories reduces the impact of our human tendency to look for any reason to confirm our current opinion, negative or positive (known as the 'confirmation bias').

Don't forget that learning also comes through those things we dread to voice— FAILURES. Use failures to learn, and show how changes made in the system can mean improvements going forward. Collaboration that fears failure will never fully function. Failure is a part of the system!

Go beyond the leadership

Collaboration involves your whole organisational system. Staff may or may not perceive the value of collaboration, or understand how it works. So share the stories of success and learning from failures with the wider community, as recognition of their work and to reinforce that this is not just important to the bosses.[6]

Celebrate both the people who have collaborated and the fruits of their work. Raise the visibility of collaborative leaders and followers. Be careful, however, about explicit rewards for collaboration, because this can backfire and collaboration will be done only for the reward, rather than being driven by the motivation to deliver value, having pride in doing good work, and the joy of working with others to create what was impossible for any single individual.[7]

In terms of network collaboration, many people in organisations are unaware of how network collaboration tools work or understand their value. So the starting point is to make these tools available and help people to use them.

C. IMPLEMENT COLLABORATION TOOLS

New tools can help support all three types of collaboration. The key here is to identify what collaboration activities you want to support, and then match the tools to them. Be careful to start simply and not go overboard. Bells and whistles look nice, but they can also be off-putting, especially to busy people who are not tech-fans in the first place! Here are the basic technologies that might be useful for collaboration, but which will be doubly important for people who are geographically dispersed, something that is becoming the rule rather than the exception these days.

- Telephone and conference-call capability, including call recording, can support teams and communities to focus work and make decisions
- Email and relevant email distribution lists are good for information dissemination, though be cautious about volume and make sure content is relevant to the recipient for any kind of collaboration
- A place to share electronic documents
- Ways to share ideas and create content together (e.g. shared document editing, blogs and wikis)
- People directory with photos of your collab-orators at the team and community levels
- Instant messaging to see when someone is available for a chat (presence) or to ask a quick question
- Directory of relevant networks
- Social bookmarking to share internet treasures
- Tools to aggregate content from the 'outside world', such as RSS readers.

Many of the above features have been combined in commercial and open source collaboration software tools. They often also include features like group calendar, discussion threads, and photo and video sharing.

In terms of network collaboration, many people in organisations are unaware of how network collaboration tools work or understand their value. So the starting point is to make these tools available and help people to use them. Start with social bookmarking and show early adopters some

tools like 'delicious' (http://www.del.icio.us), which enables people to bookmark and tag web-pages. Unlike individual bookmarks or 'favourites', anyone can see everyone else's bookmarks. Here are Shawn's bookmarks: http://del.icio.us/unorder. However, the real value is in the 'tag' associated with each bookmarked page—the word or label that indicates what the web-page is about, and a way of finding that web-page again. Encourage people to perform a search on delicious for a tag they want to keep track of. I track the tag 'storytelling'. The search results has its own RSS feed to which you can subscribe with your 'information aggre-gator'. Ron Lubensky, one of our commenters on the Anecdote blog, explains that this means that whenever someone tags a web-page with your tag (word/phrase) of interest, you are immediately notified.

D. START COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Developing communities of practice is an organic activity. You never quite know what is going to happen or whether it will succeed entirely. This is why a big bang approach is a mistake. To herald to your entire organisation that you are going to develop a community of practice on topic X is likely to cause pain if the initiative fails to gain sufficient support. We have seen this happen, and it is even more common when the organisation has just invested in community technology which has forums functionality—"We must get CoPs going so that people are using this forum functionality".

We recommend you take a more gentle approach.

- Identify some people with common interests in a domain that is important to the business
- Meet with each person separately and ask them about the things that interest, challenge, excite or intrigue them. Common items of interest invariably emerge
- Report to your potential community members that they have some interesting things in common and offer to organise a meeting so they can discuss them
- At the meeting, suggest they might meet regularly to enhance their learning around this important topic.

Once the group starts to develop a rhythm (meeting regularly), suggest they think of small tasks to work on together that might improve their practice. Only when the group members say things such as, "How are we going to share these documents?" or "Can we discuss this online?" do you investigate technology support. Some groups will get to this point faster than others will, and it does not matter one bit.

Keep a look out for indicators that suggest your community is making progress. But whatever you do, don't let management turn these indicators into targets! You don't want a situation where management, for example, is mandating that the community post X number of messages or have Y number of people attend the community meetings. Indicators are useful. Turning them into targets creates perverse behaviour.

Testing the likely adoption

Before you start on the journey of creating a new community of practice, we recommend you conduct the following simple test. When someone says, "I would like to start a community of practice", simply ask, "Can you describe the potential members by completing the following sentence? 'I am a ...'." If they can fill in the blank with a word or phrase that people can passionately identify with, then there is a chance a community might emerge. Let me give you an example. I was helping the Department of Defence design a community of practice for project managers. I asked the sponsor to complete the test sentence and the answer was, "I am a project manager". It was a strong descriptor, so we knew we had a chance of establishing a CoP. During the design process, the client had another job type for which they wanted a community. The job type was called 'technical'. "I am a technical" failed the test and we knew it didn't have a chance.

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