

LEADING AND MANAGING VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE (VCoPs)

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ABSTRACT

Purpose

The extant literature on virtual communities of practice (VCoPs) reveals ongoing research on the technographic profile and virtual experiences of community members, the impact of technology on interpersonal behavior and group dynamics, and the architecture of virtual spaces; however, the literature is relatively mute when it comes to an understanding of the emotional experiences of leading and managing VCoPs. This paper attempts to illuminate various aspects of leading in cyberspace, with special emphasis on the intersection of virtuality and emotion. The paper also explores if a change in context favourably or unfavourably impacts leadership styles and outcomes, when most of the work is carried out in VCoPs.

Design/methodology/approach

Experiences of two co-leaders (teacher researchers) at an institution of higher learning in UK were examined to draw parallels between their experiences and those of other leaders who run contemporary business organizations, and have been charged with leading and managing virtual communities of practice. A grounded theory methodology, using a social constructivist and psychoanalytic approach was deployed for the study. This paper also delved into contextual leadership and examined VCoPs through two different lenses (worldviews), namely communitarian and network.

Findings

Permissiveness, intersubjectivity, disinhibition, and the amorphous nature of a VCoP may have an impact on leadership style. The two worldviews, communitarian and network appear to be mutually exclusive in their stated positions, leadership styles, and foci; however, they share more commonalities than differences, especially when examined in the context of virtuality.

Research limitations/implications

The study contributes to an understanding of how meaning is constructed by students and educators learning together in a predominantly virtual setting, where the absence of paralinguistic cues and spatial indicators can be particularly problematic.

Practical implications

Insights and findings from this paper may help leaders in thinking about their own leadership styles in virtual settings, and improve upon the quality of their interactions, while building swift trust and the creation of a values-driven enterprise. The leaders' external authority and control are no longer the primary determinants of members' personal accountability and sense of purpose, often

necessary to shape the future outcome of the community. A contrast of the two worldviews and how they intersect with virtuality, provides a unique framework that suggests a new way of looking at VCoPs.

Originality/Value

Dynamics of leadership behaviours in virtual settings and their impact on the outcomes of communities were explored in the paper. Managers and professionals working in geographically-dispersed team settings, especially in knowledge-based organisations, can better equip themselves through an understanding of the emotional experiences of leading and managing VCoPs.

Keywords: *VCoPs, Virtual Communities, Group Dynamics, Leadership Style*