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The Revolution is Online: Leading Social Change

Two Polilogue Case Studies

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PAPER ONE

Between a Rock and Cyber Space: Nonprofits, Knowledge, and Technology

can be found on kpublic.com.

Over the last two years we have worked with new online communities of practice in both the public and non-profit sectors. Some communities have exceeded the goals they set out to achieve, others have met or almost met them, several did not meet the goals or hardly did so but the process, nonetheless, had beneficial effects on the organization and team, one failed completely. The outsized successes prove the power of this approach to work. The failure and under-performers help to set the parameters for investment.

Perhaps surprisingly, the critical success factors for a high-performing online community of practice have absolutely nothing to do with technological aptitude. Indeed the basic skills required for community participation are well and widely honed—dare we say ubiquitous: signing on and setting a password, sending and receiving email with attachments, and “googling” i.e. using search. The two key determinants of community success hark back to MBA Management 101: the strategic clarity and capacity for collaborative leadership in the organization, and the specificity and practicality of the community mission.

An online community of practice is a group of people who come together to do a piece of work. Face-to-face meetings and conference calls are almost always components of the work process, but virtual work, or rather work that is done in a virtual environment, dominates. The double-edged sword of a virtual community is that it both amplifies able leadership and magnifies dysfunction. In other words, online communities of practice are a potent tool for the strong (enlightened) manager who is not only comfortable with setting a general course and allowing the “team” or the “field” to develop the road map, but who sees the advantage of achieving organizational and cultural change by engaging people rather than mandating or dictating. Needless to say a tool and process that fosters collaboration and inclusion—an easy widening of the circle—and

makes precise outcomes inevitably unpredictable, is problematic in the hands of a traditional hierarchical manager, a micro-manager or narrow tactician.

A Great Success and a Complete Failure – What Can We Learn?

State of Virginia Department of Education – Adult Education Accelerated model development and roll out at scale, with wholesale change in strategic focus and culture in the bargain!

THE CONTEXT

In the fall of 2003 Governor Mark Warner of Virginia set an 18-month public goal to double the number of annual GED recipients in the State. On average 10,000 Virginians passed the GED tests each year. The Governor challenged the State Dept of Education to take this number to 20,000 per annum by 2005. Dr. Yvonne Thayer, Director, Adult Education and Literacy, saw the daunting mandate as an opportunity. She recognized that this “crisis” could serve to facilitate implementation of a radically new model of GED programming, one that incorporated active student recruitment, new teaching techniques, and critically, one that could drive a mindset or cultural shift away from the traditional adult education worldview of “literacy as empowerment” to a transformative self-image—that of provider of “practical skills for workplace advancement.” Most importantly, Dr. Thayer saw that if she could both develop and implement this new GED model *with some in the field* and have it be successful, she would have a lever to bring both a changed programmatic approach and a changed mindset to the field as a whole.

FROM 0 TO STATEWIDE ROLL OUT IN 12 MONTHS

November 2003

Dr. Thayer convenes a small team within the Department of Education to set out the key dimensions of the new program. Together they place some stakes in the ground, mandating a 6-week program and suggesting eligibility criteria for prospective students.

January 2004

Dr. Thayer convenes 5 program managers from sites across the State. They are selected based on the diversity of their populations (urban/rural), their openness to change, and willingness to work collaboratively. The group begins to develop a “Fast Track” program built around the parameters set out by the State. At Dr. Thayer’s urging they move rapidly to launch pilot programs to learn by doing. The first Fast Track class enters programs in February.

March 2004

Dr. Thayer invites Knowledge in the Public Interest to meet (in person) with the 5 pilot program managers. She asks them to form an online community of practice or *Polilogue*, to share their implementation experiences and accelerate the adoption of emerging “better practices.”

A three-hour strategy meeting with Knowledge in the Public Interest leads to the establishment of the Fast Track Online Community. Its focus reflects the interests and needs of the program managers: marketing and recruitment, curriculum and staff development, budgeting, funding and partnerships with State workforce organizations and the business sector, and reporting.

April to July 2004

Pilot program managers participate in several “jams” or asynchronous discussions in the *Polilogue* during which experiences and ideas are exchanged and materials are shared. These early Jams are facilitated by Knowledge in the Public Interest and Dr. Thayer follows the discussions closely, leading off each one with a posting on her ambitions for the work.

The pilot program managers had focused intensely at the start on marketing to support recruitment because they had to fill classes to get the new program off the ground. They had developed radio ads, bus posters and the like. An important first Jam on marketing addressed the principle of market segmentation. The experience in the field had allowed some initial thinking to emerge on the profiles of people most likely both to be interested in the idea of an accelerated GED program and capable of passing the tests after only 6 weeks of preparation. The community was able, through discussion, to link these findings to basic marketing concepts of message and medium. As a result they were each able to rapidly adapt their “pitch” and refine their expenditures to target more narrowly their best prospects.

Knowledge in the Public Interest organized, summarized, and analyzed the work of each Jam, as an easy reference for the participants, as a source of knowledge for the future, and as an input for Dr. Thayer as she guided the pilots. Market segmentation became an important insight for the Dept of Education as it prepared for rollout beyond the pilots.

August 2004

The basic efficacy of the program model is established by the 5 pilot sites. At the annual statewide GED conference Dr. Thayer asks the pilot program managers to share their experiences with the full group. Each covers a different dimension of the pilot program, basically each of the *Polilogue* topic areas, rather than speaking only to her own program experience. Dr. Thayer then invites 10 additional program managers to join “Fast Track”.

She brings the new program managers into the *Polilogue* and insists that everyone use the community to get up to speed. She sees the advantages of relying primarily on the online community of practice as several: the new program managers can learn together from all five of the pilot managers and their staffs, without leaving their sites and effectively on an as-needed basis. The result is rapid build-up to launch. And the peer-to-peer collaborative nature of the community helps the new program managers to see themselves as fellow program builders and adapters, rather than as recipients of a fixed model. This obviates resistance so common when a funder insists on a challenging goal.

One Jam held among the 15 participating program managers concerns funding and relationships with local Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs). Relationships are constructive and supportive in some regions and antagonistic and fruitless in others. Tactics, presentations, and data are shared. In analyzing the exchange, Knowledge in the Public Interest highlights the apparent confusion among program managers over the WIB’s funding obligation for adult education. Dr. Thayer acknowledges the confusion and enlists the State Department of Labor in clarifying its mandate in this regard. While there is no provision for WIB funding of adult education, Dr. Thayer secures an expression of support from the Department and paves the way

for W1B/Adult Education cooperation in the field. She models the approach for the program managers who begin to emulate it on the ground.

October 2004

Dr. Thayer feels that the model has been sufficiently developed and vetted and is indeed producing strong GED pass rates in the 6-week time frame. She takes the program to scale, bringing in all 50 adult education GED sites across Virginia. The entire program rollout takes place via the *Polilogue*. Launch occurs over two days with a succession of Jams held on each major program element and moderated by the group of 15 experienced program managers. Once again the Polilogue provides a twofold benefit. The first is in cost and time savings, as program managers are introduced to the program elements from their work desks. The second could be characterized as psychological. The inculcation is peer-to-peer and the explicit messaging is that a new program manager is being offered the benefit of the experience of others, which s/he as a professional can consider and adapt to the environment in which s/he operates.

What Has Happened Since?

IN THE ONLINE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE:

At the suggestion of program managers, a community of instructors has been formed in the Polilogue. This group has collaborated on issues ranging from technology-based self-instructional aides for GED preparation, for which various vendors were brought into the Jams to answer questions and offer advice, to summer school planning.

A new community is being launched to bring together adult education professionals with those in the health care field, to build explicit bridges for prospective students.

IN ADULT EDUCATION IN VIRGINIA:

In the period June 2004 to July 2005 20,000 people received their GED certification

90% of those enrolled in a GED “Fast Track” preparation program received GED certification

All GED preparation courses in Virginia are adopting the basic elements of “Fast Track.” They are working to both accelerate the time involved in preparing for the test by adopting and adapting “Fast Track” pedagogical and motivational techniques, and by building substantive and wide ranging relationships with local employers to establish a tight link between training and work.

Conclusions

In almost any sector, whether public, private or non-profit, the creation of an effective programmatic response in 12 months to a challenging and arbitrary mandate, such as doubling the number of GED recipients, is admirable. To take this program to scale, that is to go statewide in this timeframe, is unheard of. The online community of practice was only one element in the development and rollout process, but it was a critical one for two reasons.

Firstly, it facilitated and indeed encouraged the development of a robust and ultimately successful program model, by supporting rapid learning and adaptation—allowing many to take on that which some had found to work and to abandon that which some found unproductive. And, through after-the-fact analysis of group work,—examining the digital paper trail so to speak—to uncover issues that were inhibitors to progress but not explicitly apparent and raise them for management action.

Secondly, it maximized the practicality of the program elements by having the field drive the details, and it minimized the inevitable resistance to change that is perceived to be imposed from outside (i.e. the Department of Education or “headquarters” in private sector parlance). The Governor’s mandate was the non-negotiable impetus for change and the hand of the Department of Education was an ever-present guide as well as a source of pressure. Nonetheless, the field determined the nature of the response and really became responsible for the program’s success.

However, there was an intangible benefit to engaging the field in an online community of practice that may actually prove to be its greatest advantage. The very act of working virtually, for a group of relatively technophobic people, served to open them up to new ideas and approaches. Given their age and professional experience, many went where they had never expected to venture. The experience built confidence and seemed to counter the resistance to change so well-embedded in human nature.

It is a credit to the process and to her leadership that, while Dr. Thayer has moved on from the Department, the Polilogue continues and expands in support of GED preparation in the State of Virginia.

CLIENT B: A public policy organization focused on democracy reform and economic equity in the United States

A failed effort to coordinate the community of attorneys working on and writing about state by state implementation of the Help America Vote Act in the run up to the 2004 elections.

CONTEXT

In the aftermath of the 2000 Presidential election with its floating chads and allegations of unfair denial of access to the voting booth, Congress passed the Help America Vote Act known as HAVA. The Act’s enforcement varied by state depending primarily on a state attorney general’s or other authorized party’s interpretation of the law. There was great concern, particularly among public policy groups such as Client B, that citizens would not know their rights in any given state and that this would lead to illegal denials or wasted votes on the day of the election.

Client B describes itself as “up and coming” because it is a relatively new player in the public policy sector. It was working hard in advance of the election to address relevant issues of public policy and was both supporting and contributing to the library of material on state interpretations of HAVA. What Client B observed in September was that there was little communication among the community of lawyers writing on HAVA, and that there was a risk that several organizations and attorneys would duplicate work on some states while no one addressed other states. They decided to create a community of practice for attorneys preparing state-by-state HAVA information.

What Went Wrong?

The critical missing ingredient was leadership but perhaps not in the traditional sense of the word. Client B saw the problem facing the field—too many independent practitioners potentially working at cross-purposes. However, the relative youth of the organization in the public policy sphere prevented it from galvanizing the community to come together to share knowledge and collaborate in the interest of the maximum public good. Unable, or perceiving itself to be unable, to get the attention of key people in relevant organizations working on HAVA to talk about the idea, Client B decided to form a stealth community, load on a multitude of documents, and then hope that the community would see the value of this virtual resource and join in.

This approach inevitably put the technology cart before the HAVA-coverage-for-every state-in the union horse. Attorneys never came together to strategize about the best way to get the needed work done. They were not led or helped to recognize that their individual desires for publicity and recognition for their work were less important than the value to the political system of citizens residing in each state in the United States having the information they might need concerning their voting rights. When offered a chance to see what was possible via a poorly attended conference call, new technology seemed daunting and a time-consuming distraction from their important work.

What Can We Learn?

The Government of Australia defines a community of practice as “a group of peers with a common sense of purpose who agree to work together to share information, build knowledge, develop expertise and solve problems. Communities of practice are characterized by the willing participation of members, and their ongoing interaction in developing a chosen area of practice.” We would add that for “first-timers” the group needs a leader who sees the opportunity and has the capacity to paint the picture of possibility for the group. The focus **MUST** be on the work itself. Once this is established and a shared plan unfolds then the incentive to turn the mind to working in a technological environment is compelling. Issue first—technology second.

Indeed communities of practice require ongoing planning and facilitation. Just as effective work groups, task forces and committees of any stripe require someone to inspire and to push or pull. And it is always an advantage if someone (else) will attend to the administrative details and generally smooth the process for everyone.

Conclusion

In our first white paper, *Between a Rock and Cyber Space: Nonprofits, Knowledge, and Technology* (2003), we suggested that there were several dimensions to a creating a robust Internet-based knowledge system. We said that such a system would need to be:

- Available, accessible, and facilitate the easy exchange of data
- Private, secure, and confidential
- Integrated with work (experienced as a productivity tool not an add-on to work)
- Reliable (data)

As we explain in this paper, using two contrasting case studies, these are indeed important technological variables that enable virtual collaboration, but the key predictors of success are really organizational. We define them below, drawing heavily on the Virginia Department of Education model.

Leadership The champion of the community should be a strong, democratic knowledge steward, with a clear sense of purpose. This person does not need to be an active member of the community but a community will work best when this person has both the responsibility and the authority to make decisions when needed.

Social Imperative A clear, shared understanding of the organization's purpose and the rationale for the strategies to be used to advance its cause. This imperative gives context for the community and establishes the criticality of its work.

Focus The tactical expression of the purpose of the community and the narrow, well-defined, tangible piece of work it will seek to accomplish.

Pioneers The small group of people who are respected, eager learners, and natural innovators, who come together to develop a work plan around the Focus and undertake the initial work.

Resource The time, money, and people within the organization needed to support the community.

Assessment and Analysis A process and routine for harvesting knowledge from the site to both advance the work and capture its value. At the end of the day, the most important measure of the value of a community is if the work is achieved, and if the Polilogue materially enhanced the speed, quality, and/or effectiveness of the outcomes.

In our forthcoming paper *Polilogue, A Leader's Guide: Concepts, Strategy, and Planning*, we address online community methods and tools for leaders of social innovation. We will look more closely at the success predictors and describe our model for planning, growing, sustaining, linking, and analyzing communities.