

Curiosity Within Community

ORGL 522 – GONZAGA UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

Contemporary organizations often rely on teams to accomplish goals and complete operational objectives, and for good reason. “When a team becomes aligned, a commonality of direction emerges...There is commonality of purpose, a shared vision and understanding of how to complement one another’s efforts. Individuals do not sacrifice their personal interests to the larger team vision; rather, the shared vision becomes an extension of their personal visions” (Senge, 2006, p. 216). Additionally, results from the simulation game titled Lost on the Moon continually indicate that group scores are not only better than the average of the group members individual scores, but that these group scores are consistently higher than the best individual score. Implying “the group can achieve a level of knowledge higher than the groups most knowledgeable member” (Palmer, 1993, p. 94).

As described by Senge, this alignment is a key component to transforming a collection of individuals into a team. He continues with an additional component of high functioning teams by distinguishing between the concepts of individual learning and team learning. “Individual learning, at some level, is irrelevant for organizational learning. Individuals learn all the time and yet there is no organizational learning. But if teams learn, they become a microcosm for learning through the organization” (Senge, 2006, p. 219).

By placing an importance on learning at the team level and beginning to reference the team as a sub-unit of a whole (i.e. the organization), Senge hints at what I believe truly exemplifies high function teams; their ability to not only perform beyond the sum of their individual contributions but to translate this synergy beyond the boundary lines of their team into the larger organization within which they belong. As alignment and commonality of purpose

create a team from a collection of individuals, in my view, it is this translation of synergy that creates a community from a team.

As an organizational leader, it is my intention to energize and focus my team in pursuit of common goals and to do so, I must contribute thoughtfully and energetically to the community within which we belong. What follows is an exploration of my experience studying community with the monks of St. Andrews Abbey in Valyermo, CA and the practical applications these experiences have for fostering community development within my organization.

Organizational Context

The organization that I work within, Cochrane & Company, is a managing general agent focusing on commercial excess and surplus insurance. In short, we are a commercial insurance wholesaler providing underwriting services for the liability and property risks challenging contemporary businesses. Cochrane & Company employs just over 100 people, with approximately 60 working from our home office in Spokane, WA. The remaining staff is located throughout the United States in over a dozen small or home offices. This organization is a privately held and family run organization with nearly 60 years of successful growth and history. As a wholesaler of insurance, we operate in a business-to-business model wherein our customer is not the ultimate consumer of our products and services, nor is Cochrane & Company the direct producer of the insurance products represented to our clients. In the simplest form, we sit within the middle of two primary external stakeholder groups. The first of these groups being our primary customer, who is the independent insurance agent working on main street America to sell insurance coverage to their clients. These clients are themselves business owners looking for

insurance coverage for risks unique to their own businesses and by extension, these policyholders are considered secondary customers of Cochrane & Company. The second primary external stakeholder group is comprised of the insurance companies represented by Cochrane & Company that ultimately provide the capital to pay insurance claims when a covered peril befalls a policyholder.

For the past 15 years, I have served Cochrane & Company as the leader of our technology team. In this role, I am formally tasked with providing technology innovations that support and enhance our business environment in several capacities such as reduced operational costs, increased transactional efficiencies, and new technology offerings focused on solutions that foster innovative business practices for our various profit centers. I provide oversight and executive level support for our network and systems administration team focused on daily operational duties as well as disaster recovery planning and execution. I also provide strategic direction and capacity planning for our software development team who creates customized software solutions for business units from all areas of the organization. As a leader within the organization, I am also informally presented with the opportunity to help define cultural norms for operational challenges that emerge beyond our day-to-day business transactions. It is in the combination of my explicit and implicit roles that I have the opportunity to become a more effective leader by contributing to the development and well-being of our organizational community.

Observing Community

Our days at St. Andrew's began with silence and an understanding that we would gather in the chapel prior to sunrise for Vigils. After Vigils, the schedule at the abbey was to be controlled by the toll of the chapel bell, which sounds to announce four events: Lauds, Mass, Vespers and Compline. On paper, this schedule appears to demand a rigidity of formal practice and breaks apart the day into very discrete components. In practice, I found that rather than segmenting the day into disjointed pieces, the sound of the bell was received as an invitation to put your current task to rest and gather again in the chapel. Peter Block describes an invitation as "...more than just a request to addend; it is a call to create an alternative future, to join the possibility we have declared...The distinction here is between invitation and the more typical ways of achieving change: mandate and persuasive marketing...What is distinct about an invitation is that it can be refused, at no cost to the one refusing" (2018, p. 118).

During a class discussion, Father Aelred also remarked: "You join a community not because of wanting to be a monk, you join in part of wanting to be a part of 'the vibe' that is there. The talents and gifts you have are contributed in support of the community." By following the Rule of Benedict, the monks at St. Andrews certainly have a mandate to attend these daily sessions, however they have all previously accepted an invitation, as described by Block, to join the community and are, as mentioned by Father Aelred, committed to supporting the vibe, or alternative future, of the community. I believe it was the subtlety in this exchange of invitation and acceptance that I perceived during my stay at the abbey and, as a result, I easily settled into the routine offered by the bell's toll; finding its rhythm soothing rather than strenuous and burdensome.

While studying at the abbey, a different monk would join our class for an hour in the evening each day and provide us an opportunity for an open interview in a question and answer style discussion. This time provided us all with a unique opportunity to discuss life at the monastery from several different perspectives. As we listened to each of the monk's stories, nearly all described an initial sense of being underwhelmed at the abbey grounds. For many the ranch style architecture was atypical of their expectations for a monastery. However, in their own way, each person connected with the community and felt a calling to join. During these interviews, it was impressed upon me how each of the monks do have a very different story for how they came to St. Andrews and yet, at the very same time, they all hold a strong, and almost identically described connection to the community at the abbey. After learning about what initially attracted each monk to St. Andrews, we discussed the challenges present in the rhythms and cultures of monastic life at the abbey. It was during these deeper discussions that the interview sessions began to reveal how impactful and relevant the elements of life at the abbey would be for providing insight into leadership opportunities that exist for me within my organization.

As an example, and I paraphrase rather than provide direct quotes, during our discussion with Father Carlos, a classmate postulated about business objectives typically being focused on not doing the same old thing; that we are often looking for a fresh angle or to be first in some way. She observed that by reading and chanting in the same way everyday for years, the monks don't appear to have an opportunity to change. As we discussed this idea with Father Carlos, he responded that while it may appear from the outside everything is the same, a word or phrase he has repeated hundreds of times may suddenly hit him in a new way. He suggested his mindset and needs are different each time he reads or chants and, critically, he is open to altering his

viewpoint as he suddenly sees a passage for the first time again. In *Community*, Peter Block discusses this as our individual context, and he suggests “nothing in our doing or the way we go through life will shift until we can question, and then choose once again, the basic set of beliefs...that lie behind our actions (p. 15). Block goes on to describe the word possibility as a “declaration of what we create in the world each time we show up” (p. 16).

Within this insight from Father Carlos is a real-world example of Block’s theories and a reminder that we have a choice on how to perceive the world we participate in. In my organizational community, we are often looking for innovation and yet we do it in the same way everyday. The same people, in the same organizational structures, gather in the same rooms to solve organizational problems. In retrospect, it appears that these long running teams within our organizational life are not actually all that different from monastic life and Father Carlos provides a timely reminder that, as individuals, we are constantly changing and by honoring an obligation to others in our community to remain open to fresh understanding we may find a solution suddenly presents itself where before we found none.

From these interviews and lessons at the abbey, I have come to focus on three aspects of leadership that will contribute to the development of community within my organization:

- Providing an invitation to gather
- Intrateam development and co-creation
- Advocating for inquiry

An Invitation to Gather

As a technology leader of our software development team, I am often tasked with designing automations that provide new efficiencies. The task at hand is often to determine what our development team can create to assist the staff in focusing less on keystrokes and data processing and more on the true value of our business – providing solutions for our customer’s insurance problems. Over the years, I have gained a great understanding of our industry and business models, our challenges and our needs, however, I believe that the ideas for innovation should always come from those the innovation is designed to support. The task I must accomplish is not to determine what to build but to “..create the conditions for civic or institutional engagement. [I] do this through the power [I] have to name the debate and to design gatherings” (Block, 2018, p. 90). This requires me to provide a compelling story as to why I am requesting a meeting and what future possibility I would like those attending to help create. Rather than direct action toward a vision I may have, my goal is to provide the catalyst for the first step and then to retreat into the gathered community as each individual engages in the conversation.

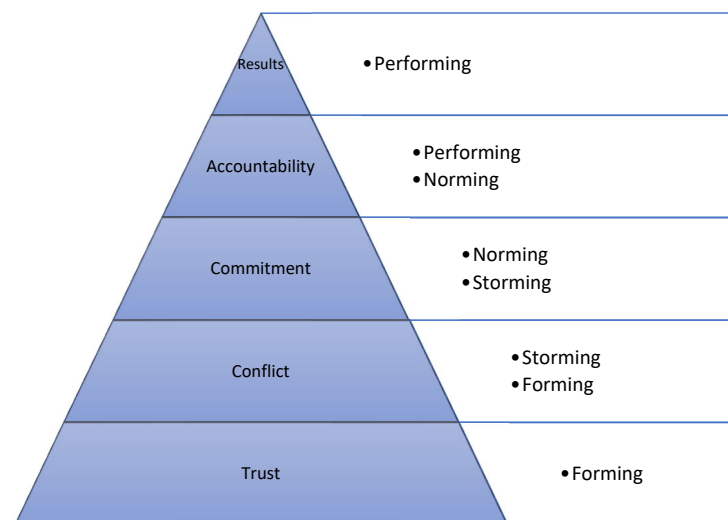
Once the attendees have gathered, the layout of the room and structure of the meeting itself remains critically important to support community engagement on the issue at hand. As with many corporate environments, our office contains a large conference room with an oblong table seating a dozen to a side. I use this conference room only when absolutely needed and prefer to utilize our smaller conference room with a round table seating eight. To use Aelrid’s word, the vibe of a meeting at the round table is generally more collaborative and open. This is not surprising considering a circle is universally understood as a symbol of connection. Also like many contemporary organizations, we have a number of telecommuters or attendees joining into

a meeting virtually. This presents more of a challenge for me as facilitator to insure all voices are heard. The conference phone is analogous to a microphone on a stand, with people lined up to speak. While there is no physical line of attendees, the ability to interact in real-time is hampered by the teleconference and without attention to detail by the leader, those on the other end of the telephone line are likely to swing to either extreme of little participation or domination of the airwaves. Video conference solutions do help bring a layer of connection and community back into these meetings as I utilize this method with my team of direct reports daily. However this function is not yet universally adopted throughout the organization and, as a leader, the layout of the room with the video presentation must also be taken into account so as to maintain the vibe provided by the circle to attendees on both sides of the screen.

In *Community*, Peter Block goes further and suggests that the chairs of our meeting places are "...a metaphor for the ability to move back and forth from the concern for the local tribal integrity and the needs of the whole. A swivel chair tells us that we must keep rotating to take in all that is around us so that what we create in our own unit or neighborhood occurs in the context of a larger world" (2018, p. 164). As Block's metaphor suggests, the design and facilitation of the meeting environment is a physical representation of the synergy I believe exists within those high functioning teams that are able to translate their energy beyond their individual group into their larger organizational community. "For community building, we want to give as much or more attention to that which creates energy as we give to the content, which usually exhausts energy" (Block, 2018, p. 98).

Intrateam Development and Co-Creation

As individuals come together, they begin the formation of their first community, the small group that comprises their new team. The fourth chapter in *Leadership the Outward Bound Way* provides an overview of Tuckman's model of group development, which is briefly summarized as: forming (becoming acquainted with each other and the goals of the group), storming (testing boundaries and emerging interpersonal conflict), norming (established group culture, equitable norms, relaxed need for an official leader), performing (realizing objectives not possible individually), and adjourning (closure as the group disbands or a project reaches completion). Lencioni's model, from his book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, uses a pyramid to communicate the importance of a bottom up approach to eliminating dysfunctions within a team. The base of the pyramid for a dysfunctional team is defined as the absence of trust, with additional layers being: fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results. The interplay of these two models, which I have represented below, provides a valuable reference to understanding and facilitating group cohesion and alignment.



As the new team members come together, they must work through questions such as:

- Why am *I* here?
- Who are *you*?
- What are *we* going to do?
- How are *we* going to do it?

Critically, as the team members gather to answer these questions, it is not the role of the leader to provide these answers for the team, but to allow the entire team to confer the collective understanding of their purpose. By offering a genuine invitation to gather, a leader creates the cornerstone to building trust for those that answer the invitation. As a leader, it is then my intent to design an experience intended to shift the power and accountability away from myself as the leader to the members of the community themselves. In doing so, we acknowledge the wisdom that resides in the community (Block, 2018, p. 100).

The group cohesion that forms from the team members collectively reaching the top of the composite development model above could be described by Robert Putnam's concept of social capital (Block, 2018, p. 18). Putnam further refines this concept into two subcategories: bonding and bridging social capital. "Bonding social capital comprises networks that are inward looking, composed of people of like mind. Other social networks encompass different types of people and tend to be outward looking—bridging social capital". While both aspects of social capital are important, the concept of bridging social capital is another mechanism in which high functioning teams translate their internal synergy into the larger community. By maintaining an outward looking perspective as their dominate position of social capital, the individual team members

retain their purpose of connection to the larger organizational community. In this way, “the small group is therefore the bridge between our own individual existence [context] and that of the larger community” (Block, 2018, p. 99).

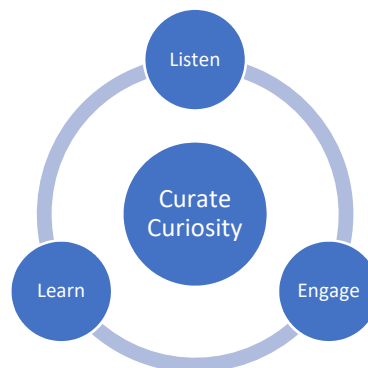
Advocating for Inquiry

Underlying all the interactions we have with groups small and large is one significant constant: our own self and our personal context or mental models. In his book *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge describes mental models as ranging from simple generalizations to the complex theories and assumptions we hold about the world around us. While we are a constant element of our own interactions with others, Senge continues that “what is most important to grasp is that mental models are active – they shape how we act” (Senge, 2006, p. 164). As our discussion with Father Carlos highlighted, mental models affect our thinking beyond preconceptions or prejudices and contribute to our changing perceptions of those around us.

In working with others, “...it helps enormously to see first how [your] own reasoning and actions can contribute to making matters worse. ... Advocacy without inquiry begets more advocacy. In fact, there is a systems archetype that describes what happens next; called ‘escalation,’ it’s the same structure as an arms race” (Senge, 2006, p. 183). Senge continues that the simplest of questions such as “What is it that leads you to that position?” and “Can you illustrate your point for me?” are able to stop this escalation cold. This ability to be genuinely interested about the reasoning of another is a third element that I believe distinguishes high functioning teams from those that are unable to translate their internal synergy into the larger organizational community. “When inquiry and advocacy are combined, the goal is no longer ‘to win the argument’ but to find the best argument (Senge, 2006, p. 185).

Curating Curiosity

In my office, I have a bulletin board with a section reserved for inspirational phrases and drawings. These artifacts are full of typical business clichés such as “When plan ‘A’ doesn’t work, the alphabet has 25 more letters” interspersed with drawings indicating how magic happens outside your comfort zone. Of the dozen or so points of inspiration, I spend the most time reflecting on one phrase: Curate Curiosity. While this phrase has no specific attribution that I am aware of, this last year I have taken this concept and added on to create the following diagram:



The three circles on the outside ring, Listen, Learn and Engage are representative of how I implement my desire to curate curiosity. I find time and again that modeling genuine curiosity is a significant tool in effectively leading my team. In transforming community, Peter Block suggests we focus our leadership attention onto conversations of invitation, possibility, ownership, dissent, commitment and gifts. Each of these conversations are supported by asking “powerful questions [that] give us the means to initiate a community where accountability and commitment are ingrained” (Block, 2018, p. 115). As a leader, I foster these community development efforts by simply curating curiosity.

References

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