

ESSAY

Why Communities Are Vital to Learning

by Rich Persaud and Gretchen Lee

There's an old saying: "You don't need to teach children how to learn; children have no choice but to learn." The same is true for adults. We are learning machines on legs, each of us collecting an enormous amount of sensory data every day. The things you learn today interact in your brain with knowledge you've already stored away—and that learning goes on 24 hours a day, at the speed of light. The earlier you can get new information in your brain, the sooner it can start compounding with the knowledge that is already there.

This process of compounding knowledge also takes place within organizations as individuals share information with one another. At the organizational level, it is a highly unpredictable, though infinitely



valuable, process because relationships among the people, objects, information, and events are always changing.

We are collecting so much information all the time. If we didn't prioritize it, there'd be no way to make



sense of it all, and we'd quickly decide to stop learning. That's where communities come in.

As we build relationships and tap into one another's networks, we create learning webs. Communities help us sort through all our information.

Communities are especially important when it comes to the strategic prioritization of publicly available information. Here is how this looks in business: Information has perishable strategic value in that what you learn today, you can act on tomorrow. But if you wait a few months to act on it, or if you don't get the information early enough, or if you don't put the information together with other knowledge you may have before your competitor does, that opportunity may be gone.

Corporations aren't the same as communities, but it's easy to see why corporations would be interested in building community among their ranks. At the core of this endeavor is the task of creating places where people are willing to share risk, because from that comes trust. And these two elements—shared risk and trust—are the building blocks of community.

Communities Share a Sense of Risk

Let's say your neighbor comes over and wants to show you his vacation photos. Though you're not so interested in his fishing trip, you might look at his photos anyway because you're thinking ahead to what will happen the next time you're on

vacation. If you want your neighbor to keep an eye on your house or take care of your dog, and you haven't been neighborly toward him, he's not as likely to help you out.

Regardless of what you think of your neighbor, the fact that you are neighbors means that you might need one another at some point. You have shared risks by virtue of your geographical proximity.

Here's another example: If someone is trying to break into a neighbor's house, and you, along with all the other people on your block, bolt your doors and call the police, that's not a community. But if instead everyone goes out and circles the house under attack with pitchforks in hand, that's a community.

One of the factors that helps us understand whether a group is also a community has to do with what happens in a crisis, and who steps up to help.

A few months ago, a science fiction bookstore that sold books by mail order found itself in a tight spot. One of its distributors had gone out of business, taking with it a huge amount of the bookstore's money. This conundrum could have forced the store to go out of business overnight. But, in a bid to stay afloat, it sent an e-mail to its customers explaining what had happened and asking them to help by ordering several books apiece. "We don't have money right now to buy inventory," the bookseller warned, "but if you buy books from us now, we'll be able to put some cash back on the books; we'll be able to sort things out so that we can survive; and we'll ship your order to you in six weeks."

There was an outpouring of support, and within 24 hours another e-mail went out saying, "Thanks for the support. You helped save the bookstore."

Those customers made choices to work together as a community despite the fact that they don't all live in the same town, they've probably never met one another in person, and they've never even conversed online. Furthermore, none of them really knew that their individual efforts could

save the business, yet each of them had come to the conclusion that placing an order was the right thing to do. When a community has a need, the members of that community rise up to meet the challenge even though they are not obligated to do so.

In the workplace, you might say, "Collaborate, collaborate," but you might feel you are facing an uphill battle. Sometimes you do want your employees to compete with each other, for the same reason that it's important for companies to compete. But in certain circumstances, you want them to collaborate and take some risks together.

One of the most familiar techniques for team building is to take people out of the business environment, put them into a new context without the normal hierarchy, and then ask them to do something like build a fence or a tree house. A lot of the dynamics from the workplace may appear, but if the group shares the risks of the project and the responsibility for its outcome, they can start to build a community.

Trust Underscores the Bonds of Community

IBM and some other companies have a culture that allows for "off-the-record" conversations. For example, you might be having a discussion in which there's a lot of conflict. At any point in the conversation, someone can offer to share information off the record. This strategy works only if the people involved trust one another. In this culture, it's generally understood that such information can't be used against the person who shares it. But it is possible to use this information in more subtle ways, changing the terms of an offer, perhaps, in order to create a win-win situation.

Because the thinking behind decisions becomes transparent, negotiations can be more productive. The meta-conversation, which is carved out as something separate from the politics of the interaction, goes something like this: "I can't tell you everything about why I can't accept your offer, but I can suggest off the record that if you

Politics are the carbon dioxide of the company. When you're in a highly political meeting, people aren't saying what they really think.

were to offer this other solution, something that you hadn't even thought about, I would be able to say yes.”

I was first exposed to this culture when I worked as an intern at IBM. And though I hadn't been there very long, I realized that I could trust this cultural norm of honoring off-the-record conversations and use it to evaluate whom I should trust. Over time, I built up a sense of confidence in the people around me, and I gained a greater sense of connection to the community.

Politics are the carbon dioxide of the company. When you're in a highly political meeting, people aren't saying what they really think. Instead, they're making moves on a chessboard. There is learning going on in that situation, an incredible amount of learning, but it's competitive in nature. That kind of learning is fine if you're in a room with your toughest competitors, but if it's your own employees in there, it's not so good. There's too much friction, and this is why activities like adventure training, mountain climbing, building a tree house, and other situations that remove people from their critical positions are so helpful.

When people trip over an obstacle at work and it's in a public context, they can't help but take note of how they're treated. Are they rewarded or punished? In this way, making a mistake or encountering a challenge can become a key learning event in the corporate culture.

If you want to create a culture that allows people to learn, you have to create an environment where people feel comfortable being vulnerable. That's not to say there's no risk involved. The only way to build trust is to have been in a vulnerable position without being hurt. You need to learn that there are certain situations in which you can take a risk without others

taking advantage of the situation and using it against you.

Communities Enhance Learning (and Vice Versa)

The process of creating a learning culture is enhanced in communities—not just because of what communities offer to the individual, but also because the learning process itself is fortified by lots of different learners compounding their knowledge.

In this way, communities offer us more meaningful learning experiences. We're always facing challenges as we extend the boundaries of our affinities and become involved with new communities, but ultimately, it's our own sense of trust and shared risk that keeps us there. That, and the infinite possibilities afforded us by learning in an environment where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Rich Persaud

Rich Persaud is the architect of cSpacer, open-source software for managing risk and social identity. He is the founder of Addapt.org and a corporate graduate of IBM, Sybase, Seeker Software, and North-point Communications. At Autometa Corporation in San Francisco, his strategic analysis bridges academic depth and industrial context. He can be reached at persaud@autometa.com.

Gretchen Lee

lives in San Francisco and has worked for more than 12 years as a reporter and editor, writing often on work-related topics. In recent years, she has also consulted with such companies as the Ninth House Network and AT&T's ImagiNation Network to develop communications strategies for the Web. Contact her at gretchen@leeworks.com.