Communities of Practice: Role of Shared Vision, Shared Goals and Accountability as Knowledge Transfer Enablers

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Abstract
Knowledge is increasingly important to the effectiveness of organizations, as most can be categorized today as being knowledge-based, at least to some degree. Transfer of knowledge, thereby, is a critical challenge. The purpose of this paper is to explore the antecedents and relationship between variables that can enable knowledge transfer within the context of communities of practice in an organization. Communities of practice are often employed in organizations, with varying levels of success, to capture and share information relevant to the community. This paper looks at the interactions between a shared vision, shared goals, and accountability, and their potential for increasing knowledge transfer. This paper takes a systems perspective and integrates the theory of social learning and goal-setting theory of motivation to develop a model that explores and hopes to predict greater knowledge transfer. Contributions to theory and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: Knowledge Transfer, Communities of Practice, Shared Vision, Shared Goals, Accountability.
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1. Introduction
As organizations evolve in an economy where growth is highly dependent on the information and knowledge available to their workers, knowledge management efforts continue to increase, and, simultaneously, these efforts face difficult challenges. Knowledge management activities are often complex and difficult to sustain for these knowledge-based organizations, which depend on the ability of individuals to create, acquire, and apply knowledge to the production of goods or services (Zack, 2003). Within knowledge-based organizations, the workers’ knowledge is a critical resource, often providing a competitive advantage for the organization. According to Chiu (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006), a high proportion of the critical knowledge within the organization exists at the individual level. Therefore, organizations could benefit from mechanisms that would enable the transfer of knowledge between individuals, within teams, and across teams or departments. Effective knowledge transfer can ensure that critical knowledge becomes known and can be applied, sometimes for repeatable gains and positive business outcomes such as innovation, competitive advantage, and growth of the business (Grant, 1996; McDermott, 1999).

Communities of practice encompass a widely researched topic under the umbrella of knowledge management (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Wenger, 2010). Organizations, however, continue to experiment with communities of practices to facilitate knowledge transfer, with inconsistent outcomes (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Kietzmann et al., 2013). While the benefits of communities of practice within organizations are generally agreed upon, such as increased innovation, problem-solving, and competitive advantage, these benefits are only realized when knowledge transfer occurs (McDermott, 1999). In other words, knowledge transfer is a critical element of successful communities of practice. For the purposes of this paper, communities of practice are defined as informal groups of people with similar interests and expertise within organizations to achieve certain outcomes (Wenger, 2010; Lesser & Storck, 2001). Viewing these organizational communities from a systems perspective, this paper explores shared goals and shared vision as antecedents that can lead to higher levels of knowledge transfer. We also consider the mediating effects of accountability among community members and leaders to further explain how shared goals and shared vision can lead to knowledge transfer.

This paper seeks to answer the following questions: What is the relationship between shared goals and knowledge transfer? What is the impact of a shared vision on knowledge transfer? Does accountability mediate the relationships between shared goals and shared vision on knowledge transfer within communities of practice? To answer these questions and better understand the relationship between knowledge transfer in communities of practice and knowledge transfer enablers, this paper first looks at communities of practice from the perspective of the systems theory. Goal-setting theory and social learning theories are then applied within the context of communities of practice and knowledge transfer. This paper contributes to the literature by looking at the interactions between the goal-setting theory of motivation and social learning theory to explain the relationship between shared goals, shared vision and knowledge transfer, and the mediating effects of accountability. While previous
research has looked at communities of practice and knowledge sharing or knowledge management, there is limited research regarding what antecedents can predict knowledge transfer in communities of practice. This paper, therefore, seeks to close this gap by exploring antecedents to knowledge transfer in communities of practice. Practical implications and future research are also explained.

2. Theoretical Background
To understand knowledge transfer, it is important to understand the system in which transfer occurs. This paper looks at communities of practice as a system that includes those community members as actors. This paper also builds on social learning theory to inform interactions within the community of practice that will lead to knowledge transfer. Goal-setting theory of motivation is also applied in explaining how shared goals, shared vision, and accountability impact knowledge transfer within a community of practice. From the perspective of the social learning theory, a community can be viewed as a simple social unit with characteristics of a social learning system. According to Wenger (2010), learning in a social context (face-to-face or virtual) requires participation and engagement from members of the social unit. Thus, this paper applies the concepts of system theory, social learning, goal setting, and motivation to understand the antecedents for knowledge transfer within communities of practice.

Social Learning theory, as theorized by Bandura and Walters (1977), suggests that individuals learn from interactions with one another in a social context by observing, imitating, and modeling. This helps to provide not just the knowledge needed but the context and proper application. Thus, the peripheral participation of the person sharing their knowledge can help inform and contextualize that knowledge (Lave, 1988). Without the proper context, information is not likely to result in meaningful learning or knowledge transfer. For knowledge transfer to occur, actors within the community require commonalities that inspire interactions and learning (Chow & Chan, 2008). Shared vision and goals can help to foster such commonalities. Also, observing, imitating, and modeling may take different forms within the community of practice, which is more likely to occur when members are engaged and committed to learning from one another. Members can then apply observed learning to accomplish their shared goals and, ultimately, the shared vision of the community of practice.

It is also important to note that for learning to occur, motivation, in addition to attention and memory, are key elements according to the social learning theory. Thus, we look at motivation as a critical element of social learning theory that explains when knowledge transfer will occur in a community of practice. According to Bandura (1988), learning is influenced by the individual's motivation, which is enhanced via goal systems. Research also shows that goals universally influence behavior and hence performance at both the individual and organizational levels (Locke & Latham, 2002). This influence demonstrates the important link between goals and performance according to the goal-setting theory of motivation (Locke & Latham, 2002; Lunenburg, 2011). Within the community of practice, performance reveals if knowledge transfer is occurring. Thus, knowledge transfer is the output of interactions between elements of the community as a subsystem of the organization’s goals.

These two theories, goal-setting theory of motivation and social learning theory, uniquely interact within the framework of communities of practice and knowledge transfer. Shared goals and shared vision will motivate those who have the knowledge to transfer know-how to
individuals who are motivated to observe, imitate, and model such that learning occurs, and the new knowledge gained can be applied. In other words, knowledge transfer will likely occur when the vision of the community of practice is shared by participants who also have shared goals and are motivated to transfer known knowledge or acquire new knowledge. Accountability of both the community members and leadership to the shared vision and shared goals may help to explain why shared vision and shared goals will result in knowledge transfer in communities of practice. The level of accountability of community members to the shared goals and shared vision is also a sensor to indicate the progress of the transfer of knowledge. Community leaders can then adjust accordingly based on feedback received to ensure knowledge transfer occurs and is sustainable. This paper now looks at the knowledge transfer model and its variables.

3. Introduction to the Model

3.1 Communities of Practice
Communities of practice are a collection of individuals who share a common concern or need to solve a common problem. These individuals share a passion for similar topics, interests, or activities with the intent of learning how to do things better based on regular interactions with others in the community (Wenger et al., 2002). This paper looks specifically at communities of practice within organizations. While the initial concept of communities of practice was not traditionally rooted in systems theory, it does have its foundations in the social element of human learning (Lave, 1988). A community of practice can, therefore, be looked at from the perspective of an open system, specifically a social system. Katz & Kahn (1971), recognize the presence of such subsystems within organizations. Communities of practice can be seen as such a subsystem. Communities of Practice will, therefore, share the characteristics of an open system such as input, outputs, and a feedback mechanism.

Communities of practice are also social learning systems based on characteristics such as its emergent structure, relationships, organization mechanisms, boundaries, identity, and in some cases, cultural elements (Wenger, 2010). Meaningful learning in social settings requires a combination of participation and reification, both of which are critical in communities of practice (Wenger, 2000). For meaningful learning to occur in communities of practice, knowledge needs to be transferred from one person to another (or within and between groups of people). This transfer of knowledge can be enabled by certain antecedents as inputs to better produce the desired output in the form of learning (both occurring and being applied). Ongoing feedback within the community also helps to ensure that adjustments and learning take place based on input from the environment to validate the vision and goals as defined by the community.

3.2 Knowledge Transfer
This paper adopts the definition of knowledge articulated by Davenport and Prusak (1998), which helps to depict the complex nature of knowledge and its transfer. The authors define knowledge as "a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insights that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates in and is applied in the minds of knowers" (P. 5). This paper draws on the types of knowledge, tacit, and explicit knowledge to further contextualize the complexity of knowledge and the importance of identifying critical knowledge transfer enablers within organizations. This paper also builds on existing research on communities of practice as one of the adopted means of knowledge transfer within organizations (Wenger et al., 2002). Explicit knowledge is the knowledge that can be easily transmitted using formal
means of communication, including letters and numbers. Tacit knowledge, on the other hand, is knowledge known to an individual based on their experience, which gives knowledge a personal element making it difficult to transfer via formal communication methods (Nonaka, 1994; Polanyi, 1966).

While this paper does not focus on the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge as a part of our model and propositions, it is important to note that tacit knowledge is a personalized type of knowledge. According to Polanyi (1966) and Nonaka (1994), tacit knowledge involves action, commitment, connection, and participation in context-specific situations. It is ingrained in the human mind and body and will require engagement and connections with like-minded individuals for any form of learning and transfer to occur. As Polanyi (1966, p.4) stated, "We can know more than we can tell." Knowledge transfer, therefore, needs to be intentional with a focus on practices that enable transfer within communities of practice.

This paper acknowledges that knowledge transfer in organizational settings can be challenging based on the type of knowledge (tacit or explicit), the time commitment required, and trust (Nonaka, 1994). Knowledge-based organizations, therefore, spend a considerable amount of resources to establish communities of practice based on known benefits of these communities such as efficient problem solving, promotion of best practices, generating new ideas, new line of business, innovation, developing expertise, training and creating competitive advantage (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). These benefits, however, may not be realized if knowledge transfer does not occur within the communities of practice. When knowledge transfer is realized, novices within organizations can acquire the knowledge-base and expertise required to solve problems, and experts can learn from other experts, or even novices, in some cases. According to Wenger et al. (2002), community members will need to understand what is important to the community and how to engage with other members of the community. If understanding what matters is a critical element of meaningful learning within communities of practice from the perspective of social structures and the social learning theory (Wenger et al., 2002), this paper then looks at shared goals, shared visions and accountability to the vision and goals as critical elements of the knowledge transfer process.

The Proposed Knowledge Transfer model is displayed below (see Figure 1):
3.3 Shared Vision
According to Prusak and Cohen (2001), cooperative action between members of networks and communities is made possible through a common understanding of shared values and expected behaviors. This paper, therefore, argues that a shared vision in communities of practice provides an agreed-upon understanding of values and behaviors which enable knowledge transfer to occur. While goals and vision have been used interchangeably, this paper differentiates between goals and visions and conceptualizes vision as a long-term perspective. Research shows that organization members who share the same vision are more likely to be committed to the organization and share resources with other members of the organization (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). Shared vision represents the aspirations of the community of practice and the bonding mechanism that helps its members to combine resources towards meeting shared goals and hence their shared vision (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998).

Drawing on communities of practice as a social system, this paper explores shared vision as an element within a system that, when combined with other variables, leads to knowledge transfer. Shared vision informs community practices and creates an environment where members identify with the vision and are committed to contributing resources to meet the aspirations of the community and its members. Lack of a compelling, shared vision will negatively impact the ability to establish norms that will motivate members to share and transfer knowledge (Chow & Chan, 2008). Previous literature suggests that shared vision is an important aspect of a cooperative relationship (Li, 2005) and that a shared vision should incorporate the organization’s culture to help foster a sense of identity, thereby creating commitment.

Shared vision has also been shown to increase trust and is considered an important element for an exchange to occur within formal and informal networks (Abrams, Cross, Lesser, & Levin, 2003). While common interests, topics, language, etc. are necessary to cultivate communities of practice, they are not sufficient for knowledge transfer to occur (Grant, 1996). This paper, therefore, proposes that a shared vision will likely promote mutual engagement and collaboration around that vision and create an environment that is conducive to sharing and learning such that transfer occurs.

Proposition 1: There will be a positive relationship between shared vision and knowledge transfer.

3.4 Shared Goals
If shared vision provides a destination, shared goals provide defined critical outcomes. According to Grant (1996), in his discussion of a knowledge-based theory of the firm, cooperation is a common problem in all forms of social organization or social systems. Organizations, therefore, continue to look for ways to reconcile the conflicting goals of its members. Looking at communities of practice from the perspective of a social system and, therefore, a form of social organization, members in a community of practice share concerns, interests and seek to increase their knowledge and expertise in related areas via continued interaction (Wenger et al., 2002). Thus, the community is also subject to conflicting and competing goals (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995). It is, therefore, important for a community of practice’s members to share and learn each other’s perspectives in the formulation of their shared goals.
Communities of practice with shared goals will minimize the risks associated with conflicting goals and promote a sense of community and belonging such that community goals are prioritized over personal goals (Wagner, 1995). Considering a hypothetical example of a systems transformation program where an organization is implementing a new business system, initiating a community of practice seems logical. Members will have shared concerns and an interest in learning the new system, thereby ensuring minimal or no disruptions to regular operations. Knowledge transfer is therefore likely to occur if goals important to all members of the community are identified, established, communicated, and agreed upon. The presence of shared goals will help to promote an understanding of what is important and what is at stake if these goals are not accomplished. Shared goals are, therefore, an antecedent to knowledge transfer within communities of practice such that members will share what they know and its context to ensure that learning occurs.

According to Gobbi (2010), communities of practice consist of three foundational dimensions: the domain, the community itself, and the practices within the community. A community's effectiveness as a complex social learning system will be based on the cumulative strength of all three dimensions. The focus and interests of a community of practice define its identity and domain, and hence what is important to the community. A collective passion for the same topics and interests accompanied by shared goals is, therefore, crucial for knowledge transfer. Also, the sense of community exemplified in the practices of both its committed leaders and members further binds its members, creating a sense of identity and belonging fostered by shared goals.

In the goal-setting theory of motivation, goals and performance are linked (Locke & Latham, 2002). Goals also have a motivational impact and can create commitment in a group or individual setting (Locke & Latham, 2002; Lunenburg, 2011). Furthermore, goals with deadlines and those that are compatible with a combination of the group and the individual will be more effective than individual or group goals by themselves (Lunenburg, 2011). This paper, therefore, looks at shared goals as those that are time-bound and a combination of individual and community goals. Shared goals that are relevant to members of the community of practice will promote a sense of community and belongingness where members are committed to meeting those established shared goals.

As organizations continue to work in groups or teams, working on established shared goals becomes important. Studies show that when a member of a team observes that other team members share similar goals, it creates an environment of collectivism. This increases the overall contributions to the team and its effectiveness (Kristoff-Brown & Stevens, 2001). Applying this concept to communities of practice, collective or shared goals reflect the community’s vision and ensures that knowledge transfer occurs and is sustained. For example, a shared vision of increased innovation will be critical to developing shared goals of increased knowledge sharing to promote innovative solutions. Experts sharing the same vision and goals as novices will be committed to transferring explicit and, even more importantly, endeavor to transfer tacit knowledge related to the development of prior innovative solutions. Novices will, in turn, seek to understand the related context and how this knowledge can be applied for repeatable successes.

Proposition 2a: There will be a positive relationship between shared goals and knowledge transfer.

Proposition 2b: There will be a positive relationship between shared vision and shared goals.
Proposition 2c: Shared goals will partially mediate the relationship between shared vision and knowledge transfer.

3.5 Accountability

In Wenger’s (2010) writings, he explains a community of practice as social systems. Based on the systemic nature of communities of practice, this paper now looks at accountability and its mediating role in explaining why shared goals and shared vision will result in knowledge transfer. Accountability is a common component of decision-making environments. Accountability is what helps to connect individuals to institutions or social systems to which they are a part, be it work-related or personal (Tetlock, 1999). Accountability reminds people to act according to expected norms. Thus, social systems cannot remain functional or sustainable for an extended period without individual accountability to what the greater system stands for, believes in, or is intending to accomplish (Axelrod, 1984).

As previously stated, shared goals and shared vision provide the required motivation for knowledge transfer to occur within communities. When members of the community have a shared vision and short-term goals to accomplish the vision, participation, and sharing occurs due to some level of accountability to the community. Members make the decision to participate, contribute, and apply learnings leading to knowledge transfer. This conscious decision to share experiences and provide the context for meaningful learning to occur is deeply rooted in accountability to the social system, in this case, the community of practice (Tetlock, 1999). Another way to look at this is through the lens of social covenants. The word community stands for common, sameness, shared by many, performing services together (Gobbi, 2010). A community represents a form of a social covenant maintained by a sense of identity and belongingness, reciprocity, obligation, duty, responsibility, and kinship (Sergiovanni, 1998). This paper, therefore, looks at accountability as the link to shared goals and shared vision resulting in stronger outcomes of knowledge transfer in communities.

Accountability to the community’s challenges, aspirations, and what it stands for, is critical to the community’s members contributing and learning (Wenger, 2010). Accountability to the competence of the community and its role within the broader organization fosters an environment of mutual understanding and acceptance of shared goals and shared vision resulting in knowledge transfer. Based on their level of accountability to its shared vision and shared goals, members who have their identity invested in the community are more likely to contribute and participate in community-related activities such as virtual discussion posts and face to face interactions. Thus, accountability to the community's present and future goals enables knowledge sharing and learning to occur. Members have a greater understanding of what is important to both the community and its individuals to drive greater contribution and learning by members.

As previously stated, knowledge transfer can be complex, especially due to its tacit nature. Tacit knowledge is derived from personal experience and requires key enablers for transfer to occur (Nonaka, 1994; Kreiner, 2002). While the extant literature looks at trust as an important factor in the knowledge transfer process and argues that risks and uncertainty that can be associated with knowledge transfer are mitigated by trusting relationships (Li, 2005; Lucas, 2005; Roberts, 2006), this paper seeks to contribute to the existing literature on knowledge transfer and proposes accountability as a key knowledge transfer enabler mediating the relationship between shared goals and knowledge transfer and shared vision and knowledge transfer. Accountability goes beyond contractual agreements to social
covenants based on a shared vision and shared goals within communities of practice such that knowledge is more freely exchanged for enhanced problem-solving, innovation, and growth.

Proposition 3a: There is a positive relationship between accountability and knowledge transfer.

Proposition 3b: Accountability will partially mediate the relationship between shared vision and knowledge transfer resulting in increased knowledge transfer.

Proposition 3c: Accountability will partially mediate the relationship between shared goals and knowledge transfer, resulting in increased knowledge transfer.

4. Discussion
In this paper, several antecedents have been proposed to enable knowledge transfer within the framework of communities of practice. Based on the literature review on communities of practice, knowledge transfer, and enablers such as shared goals, shared vision, and accountability, the importance of creating an environment where members feel a sense of community, identity, and belonging via shared vision and goals have been explored. While the complexity of knowledge transfer has not been ignored, the paper proposes that shared goals, shared vision, and the partial mediating effect of accountability enables knowledge transfer in communities of practice. Members are motivated to contribute, share, and apply learnings when goals and vision are shared, and members are accountable to those goals and vision due to a shared covenant. Risks associated with knowledge transfer are mitigated when shared vision and goals are established, communicated, and understood. The remainder of the paper offers the contributions to theory, limitations, future research, and practical implications.

4.1 Contributions to Theory
One of the biggest challenges in any community of practice is the level to which members ultimately contribute to the transfer of knowledge. This paper integrates elements of the goal-setting theory of motivation and social learning theory to pose research questions regarding the relationship between shared goals, shared vision, and knowledge transfer, such that goals and shared vision will lead to knowledge transfer. Viewing this model through the lens of communities of practice and a social systems perspective, this paper contributes to existing theory by drawing on Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, especially the elements of learning in a social context based on interactions that occur within the social system. The elements of observing, imitating, and modeling, which form the foundational features of the social learning theory helps to support knowledge transfer within the context of communities of practice. According to Wenger (2010), communities of practice require participation in the form of contribution and engagement from its members for learning or knowledge transfer to occur. Knowledge shared without the proper context simply remains information, information that will be difficult to observe, imitate, or model, thereby limiting learning or transfer.

This paper also incorporated motivational elements of both social learning theory and goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2002; Bandura & Walters, 1977). Contributors to the system are motivated to share their experiences and provide the appropriate context based on the intersection of shared goals, shared vision, and a sense of accountability to the community. Knowledge is therefore transferred from one individual to the other such that the recipient can observe, imitate, and model behaviors that lead to repeatable successes and outcomes. This paper identifies shared goals and shared vision as motivations for both contributors and
learners to ensure that knowledge shared is observable and can be modeled. This paper also extends social learning theory by highlighting the role of the contributor in the learning process within communities of practice. Contributors who feel a sense of accountability to shared goals and visions of the community (and its members) are a critical component of knowledge transfer. They provide the knowledge, experience, and context via various means to ensure that learners can apply the knowledge shared, resulting in greater knowledge transfer.

4.2 Limitations and Future Research
This paper recognizes that, while shared goals, shared vision, and accountability are explored here, there are other variables related to additional elements such as a dedicated community leader or coordinator, as well as a committed core team that could also impact the effectiveness of communities. The larger organizational culture, support for knowledge sharing efforts, and incentives will also impact knowledge transfer. Contributors may be motivated by incentives and rewards to share their experiences with others. Employees may also withhold knowledge based on perceived risks and politics associated with sharing what they know. The work environment may also impact knowledge transfer based on certain stressors such as workload, deadlines, and changing responsibilities.

This paper also acknowledges future research should consider the relevance of perspective in communities of practice. Perspective-making is known to strengthen the core knowledge of the community. In contrast, perspective-taking can enhance the community’s abilities to take the knowledge of other communities into account in knowledge production (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995). Perspective-making and perspective-taking can therefore be applied to knowledge transfer within communities.

Further empirical research is needed with hypothetical or real examples of shared goals and shared values and how the level of accountability to these shared values and goals can impact knowledge transfer. Additional research is also needed to examine competing variables and determine critical enablers that lead to knowledge transfer. Finally, the theories explored require additional review to understand the interactions or additional constructs that can be tested as a part of the empirical research.

4.3 Practical Implications
As with many organizations, communities of practice are a means to enable knowledge transfer within specific domains that are critical to the operational and strategic effectiveness of the organization. Effective knowledge transfer, however, remains a major challenge as communities depend on individuals who are committed and motivated to share their knowledge such that others can model successful best practices and behaviors. It will be essential for organizations to be intentional about a shared vision and shared goals that encompass what is important to the organization, the community, and its members.

While communities of practice might be tempted to skip the visioning and goal-setting stages based on demand and immediate needs, knowledge management owners within organizations may benefit from establishing a framework for a community of practice development. This framework can help provide the various elements required to create a shared vision and goals that will ultimately enable knowledge transfer. Goals that are one-sided and not shared by participating members may negatively impact knowledge transfer. Vision and goals should be developed with input from critical members of the community to ensure a mutual understanding and agreement of what is important to the community and its members.
Expectations should also be set around the accountability to the shared vision and goals of the community and what the benefits are. A feedback mechanism ensuring that shared goals are continually reviewed for relevance to both the community and its members may also provide some benefits to communities of practice and, ultimately, the organization. These goals should be short-term and long-term and celebrated once accomplished. Feedback should be monitored as a way to gauge the pulse of community members as to their level of accountability, which might indicate whether vision and goals are perceived as common and shared. As such, each component will work in synergy to impact accountability and enable knowledge transfer.

5. Conclusion
Although knowledge transfer is not a novel concept, it poses continued challenges for communities of practice within organizations. This paper has proposed key enablers of knowledge transfer when established as core elements of communities of practice. Critical components of communities of practice: shared goals, shared vision, and accountability, are reviewed, showing how these elements work together to result in knowledge transfer. The complexity involved with knowledge transfer is not ignored but helps to inform why shared goals and shared vision enable knowledge transfer via accountability to a shared vision and goals. Recommendations to leaders were offered to help ensure shared vision, shared goals, and accountability, elements of a community’s development.

References

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