The community Triangle - Success factors for leading Purposeful communities

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1. Purpose of this document:

To describe a best-practice case from *Purposeful communities as a driver for regional broadband use*

2. Country and Region:

Sjuhärad, Sweden

3. Issue:

Communities for regional development are considered as an important tool, they exist in a wide range of time, purpose, activity and many other contexts. The difference between projects and communities is also getting blurred. Many communities have moved from online chat forums to having as well defined goals and processes as projects. At the same time projects today are increasingly including many organizations, not only the client organization and a consulting firm. This makes it difficult to control projects in the traditional way, since the responsibility is spread out among contractors. Therefore many projects may be regarded as "purposeful communities". Some communities are of a "meta project" kind, where people engaging sharing experiences and results from different projects. Their participation in these communities is often however motivated because they are working on a particular project, where experience is needed or generated. A common experience from work with communities is that there exist many challenges and pitfalls that have to be managed in order to be successful. This project has summarized experiences from a set of communities for regional development and conceptualized the results in a framework, the community triangle, pinpointing three important dimensions to consider for deriving purposeful communities.

4. Approach / strategies / results:

The method of the paper is a qualitative study where practitioners have been engaged in interviews and workshops to create common knowledge on managing purposeful communities. The approach has been to develop "pet-theories" – easy to remember and effective heuristics that easy can be picked up by practitioners when they want to start up or manage purposeful communities. This report is based on workshops with pioneering practitioners from a number of cases in various cultures and with support of different supporting technologies. In chronological order the process can be described with the following main activities:

- Workshop on experiences of the SME-community in the Sjuhärad region, Hindås May 2006 (Organized by the authors)

- Solutions Sharing Network EMEA Summit, hosted by Microsoft, Dublin 6-7 June 06. ca 50 people with practical experiences from organizing online communities (Organized by the authors)

- Workshop on community management at the International Society for Systems Sciences, There were about 20 people from different fields and nations. (Organized by Ken Bausch and the authors)

- From these workshops a tentative model of important heuristics for success was derived. This model was then validated in two subsequent workshops.

- Workshop on successful collaborative partnerships in European R/D programs, Jan 2007, Stockholm. Ca 150 mostly experienced practitioners.

- Workshop on collaborative projects, at WM-data Stockholm. 5May 07. 10 people, IS industry people and researchers. (Organized by the authors)

- The developed model were finally criticized and refined by interviews during 2007 with ten leaders of successful community projects, in the sense of having many active participants.

This model is our attempt to summarize the most important success factors expressed as pragmatic heuristics in a model with three main dimensions.
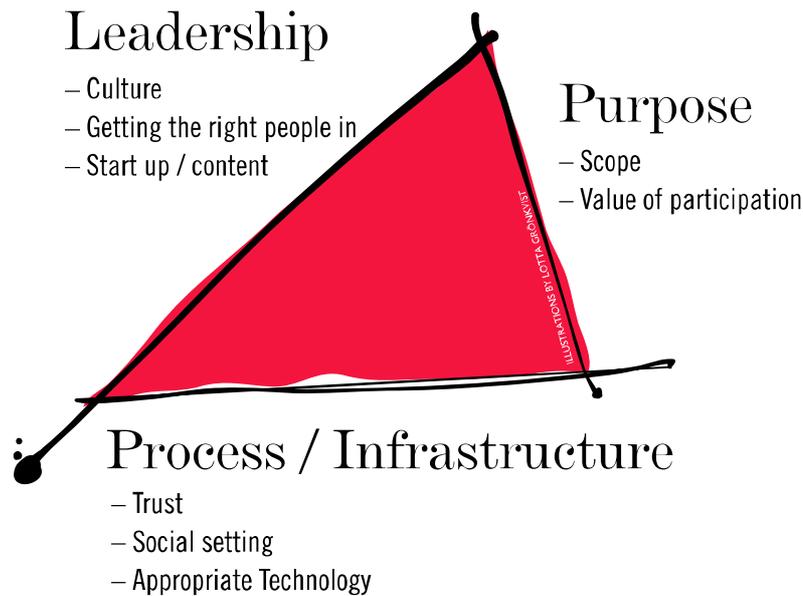
The Purposeful Community Triangle: Three important considerations for making a community work

- A ***leadership*** with high credibility in the subject is needed to lead the participants in the right direction, manage the cultural processes and to make sure that relevant content can be found.
- Initially it is the content that brings people to a specific community. Thus, there has to be some common ***purpose*** that not only needs to be in congruence with the professional role of the participants, but also be inspiring for them as well.
- Additionally, the community should have some sort of ***process*** that the participants can understand and suits the way they would like to interact. Face-to-face meetings and networking activities create trust which is important to get the process started. Language, IT platform, support and rules governing the contribution, creation and sharing of "knowledge" for the community are other concerns that need to be considered within the process.

We have found that almost all factors given by the participants fall into one or two of the three dimensions. There are of course other possible models. This one is designed to be of practical use to people trying to form and manage a successful knowledge sharing community. It is a general comment from almost all people that have been involved in this study that:

"A model like this would have been very helpful for us when we first established our SSN Portal. It covers many years of experience!"[1]

5. Relevant keywords:
Communities, Purposeful communities Innovation networks

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[1] All quotes in the paper are from the ten interviews.

6. Main Impact:

6.1. Community Leadership

"You can lead a horse to the water, but you cannot force him to drink". A leader is needed in every community to lead the people in the right direction and make sure that there is fresh water to drink (content)".

Few communities seem to survive without a person who enthusiastically leads the process. This role can span from classic facilitation, where the person just focuses on helping the participants forward in the dialogue, to a more engaged role where the person is more like a creative director or *maestro* taking an active part in shaping the outcomes. This was also a key discussion topic on innovation projects at WM-data. The conclusion was that a *maestro* type of person is needed to manage the innovation process. The style of leadership is therefore connected with the community's purpose.

6.1.1. Getting the right people on board

Part of the leadership function is getting the right people on board. At the top of a community there are often a handful of people, whom are both committed and experienced in the subject of the community issues, and really contribute in a big way both with content and culture. Getting these types of people on board is an important factor in the establishment of the community. In some of our interviews there has been a claim that around 60 people is a maximum limit for effective exchange of knowledge and experiences. Most of our research says that this cannot be a fixed number, it depends on the scenario. Often communities have a layer structure varying over time with a core team, members and visitors.

In Purposeful Communities there is also the question of engaging people influential to the purpose of the community*.* If the community is trying to have some impact it may be necessary to gain support from certain powerful people. Understanding this and getting the community to work in this direction may also be a key issue for the leadership.

A community needs to have a considerable impact on its participants from the very beginning. Consequently, releasing an incomplete community with no content could be very damaging. Most people will not give it a second chance. Thus, the Leadership will play its most important role at the start up of the community. No one will come to and put information into an empty community. He or she should initiate and encourage discussions and give each community of practice *momentum*. The leadership should have commitment to ongoing and continual improvement of all aspects of the community. It is essential that somebody from time to time injects new thinking, ideas and concepts for the participants to consider.

No one will come to and put information into an empty community.

"There has to be some kind of initial structure. You must put content in there - some suggestive answers around some widespread problems."

6.1.2. Culture

Culture has a very significant impact on the views of community participants, and their willingness to contribute. Culture can be the main barrier to sharing; hence the cultural processes must be managed. Culture will be most visible in the *process* of the community and the quality of a sharing culture is attributed to this. The main approach in fostering a sharing culture is to build trust. Historically, knowledge has often been regarded as power - if you share your knowledge you simultaneously lose your power. Nevertheless, environmental factors like the government legislation and the need for financial savings impacts the culture because it makes people accept that they have to open up; it is too expensive to develop on your own so you are compelled to find other solutions. The feeling of being a part of a greater social entity also drives people to participate and contribute with content into the community. [4]

"You don't want to share stuff with people unless you almost know it is safe. Somebody else might have done it better or they might judge me negatively so I'd rather just share with people I already know"

6.2. Purpose

"When it comes to new contributors the leadership should make sure that they get the message on what the community is all about."

Initially the following questions should be considered:

- What do I want from the community?
- What do I want to share/give to others?

- Who could have the same needs and motives?

Primarily a clear main purpose should be defined and as the community develops the purpose can be expanded to include new areas.

It is important to communicate the purpose of a community.

6.2.1. Scope and Value of Participation

If the community should last for a long time it is important that the issues that are being addressed have a big enough scope.

"The end should never be perfectly clear - people should continually solve new problems. We must remember not to have issues that are completely addressable – people must feel like they can make steps towards addressing these issues. You should not have question that is too difficult like 'what is the meaning of life?' People must feel like they can at least get close to what the answer is. "

Knowledge Sharing is still a new cultural phenomenon; in many places around the world people are not used to the notion and value of sharing. The value of participation will probably evolve during the development, and the full value may not be apparent until later in the community evolution. Still, contributors must know that something will happen with the content they are producing. They don't have to have an absolutely clear purpose, but they have to know what they are contributing to. Without quick response and credits for participation the motivation for sharing will soon disappear.

"You also have to know that something will actually happen with that content and that you will get credit for it."

6.3.   Process/Infrastructure

The community should have some sort of process that the participants can understand and that suits the way they would like to interact. This process must also appear as safe, ranging from, for instance, guaranteeing participants to be anonymous in case of politically sensitive discussion to ensuring that important intellectual property is not stolen. The culture of the community is implemented in its process.

Language is a key consideration within many communities. This applies to not only the mother tongue of the participants but also whether to use specialized language, jargon, etc. Even further, the choice of media and form is important. Should the discussion take place in virtual meetings, in huge text documents or in the form of animations demonstrating propositions?

"Even if we all speak English we come from different cultures. We often think that we understand each other – but we don't."

6.3.1. Trust
Participants must respect each other and feel that they are among friends. They must feel safe and that the information they are sharing there won't be criticized or their questions derided.

"Participants must feel safe and that the stuff they are throwing out there won't be criticized."

6.3.2. Social setting
Having actually met is often pointed out as being critical to making sharing happen. If people don't know who is in the community and they haven't met each other face-to-face, it is difficult to build the trust that is needed to get the process started. It's very strongly recommended that actual meetings are part of the process, organized in a setting that allows people to get to know each also informally and personally.
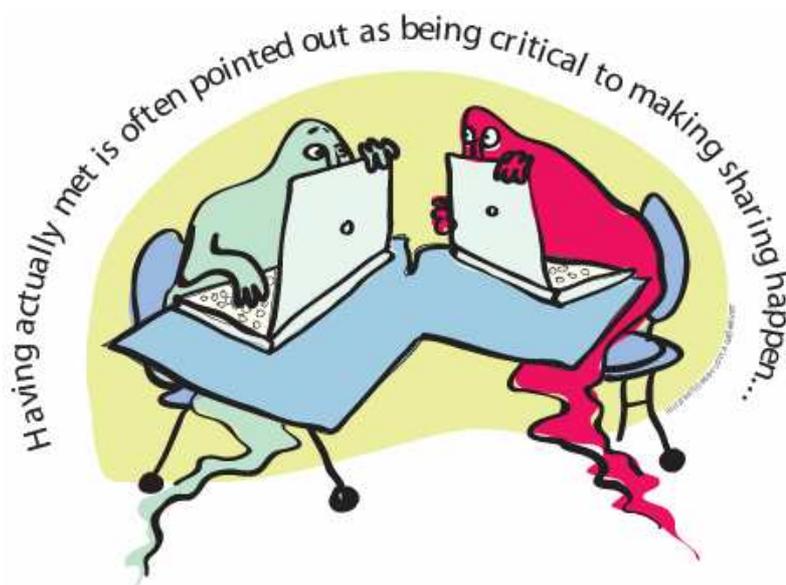
"You are more likely to Trust somebody if you have met face-to-face and shaken their hand." "Networking is one thing you can't overemphasize - that's such a huge factor for us."

6.3.3. Appropriate technology

A good technical platform can make good communities better and a bad platform can make bad communities even worse. As participants often come from different organizational backgrounds and with different skills ease of use is a major issue. Also the technology should have low barriers of entry. Participants trying the platform out for the first time need to feel encouraged and successful in doing so, otherwise there is a risk they will never return.

Have a suitable IT-platform is regarded as extreamly valuable.
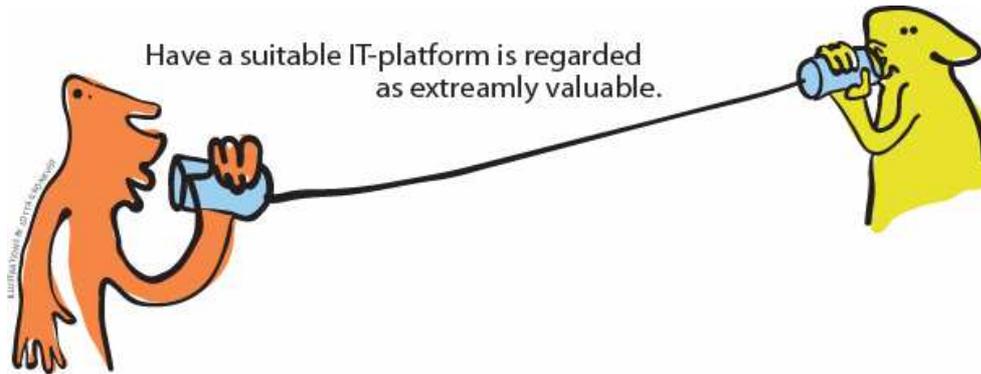
"A blocker in the past is the actual technology and the platform itself."

7. Rules & Legality

We have found that there is a huge variation in judging these issues. From the opinion that "do not talk about all rules and legal issues and questions around purposeful communities – It will just kill the community", to the other end of the scale where rules and legal issues are the key issues for getting purposeful communities to be successful. The background to this can be both a cultural issue and a content issue. It seems that some cultures are more open and "naive" from a community sharing point of view. Here we find the Scandinavian culture as one example with possible connections to the strict rules of open and transparent public government. On the other en is the American culture with much more focus on possible business outcome which makes it important to have agreed rules and legal setup for the community.

On the content side it is also possible to identify a scale. Ideas and experiences that are expressed in formal languages and technology often need a well designed legal framework to be successful while it seems to be almost the opposite with communities including verbal expressions of ideas and experiences. In these cases too much emphasis on rules can be a disturbance factor.

The case that many Purposeful Communities moves from more informal to more formal content make this picture even more complex.

One possible solution to this dilemma may be to develop an international standard on the most important rules regulating legal issues in purposeful communities.

In our work there are findings possible to use for further work in this direction.

8. Conclusions and Summary Recommendations

It is our strong belief that the intellectual world is shifting from thinking of knowledge as more or less exact depictions of reality into a mood of thinking of knowledge as more or less useful views or solutions - impacting different stakeholders in different ways. In this new mood of thinking it will be important to design more effective arenas for discussing and exchange of such useful views. We call such arenas for purposeful communities.

In this paper we have found some important first advice how to manage such purposeful communities. We also strongly have the feeling that our work is just a scratch on the surface on a much bigger issue. It is possible to imagine a future where communities are the main organizational form. There are many indications of such a development.

In addition people, at least in the western world, are beginning to add more and more perspectives when designing their life style. Environmental concerns, social responsibility in a global world, the needs of their own families and so forth.

Therefore the "community" phenomenon is likely to grow and the ability to manage and take part in such will be of increasing importance. The presented community triangle is considered a useful approach to this.

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