TenStep, Inc.

TenStep Supplemental Paper

18 January 2004

Community of Practice

For the last few decades, most US-based companies have encouraged their employees to learn to upgrade their skills informally. Simultaneously, HR managers have been working overtime to create a learning organization within their companies.

Over the decades, HR managers realized the need for an important informal learning tool called a 'community of practice.' In such communities, tacit knowledge can be acquired and transferred largely through informal contexts.

Like a plant, a community of practice does its own growing, but HR managers can help create optimal conditions and directions for growth. The following are some tips for HR managers to encourage communities of practice in their organizations:

- HR managers should let members know that their explorations are vital to the enterprise. Solicit their advice.
- Provide the money, time, and resources they need.
- If you want to create a community of practice from scratch, find a seasoned worker - a recognized expert who is interested at this point in his/her career in mentoring others - to convene a gathering.
- Try asking coworkers what they learn each day, or what they discovered that would enable the company to surprise its competitors. Build the questions into everyday practice.
- Employees talk around the water cooler. As a HR manager, do not assume they are wasting time.
- Formal and informal learning mutually reinforce each other. To maximize such reinforcement, ask employees returning from formal training to present what they have learned to their colleagues. This helps create alignment among employees.

Copyright© 2000-2004 Ten Step, Inc. and C & K Management Limited