

Collective Transformation: Fostering Peer-Driven Transformational Leadership in Communities of Practice

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Abstract: While transformational leadership (TL) thrives in uncertain environments through knowledge exploration, research often focuses on the top-down dynamics between managers and employees. This study analyzes peer-driven TL within communities of practice (CoPs). Effective TL involves personal changes that trigger similar transformations in others. With their emphasis on knowledge creation and innovation, CoPs facilitate TL development, community growth, and reliable environments that engender transformative responses among members. Through a comprehensive literature review, detailed analyses, and semi-structured interviews, this study examines the conditions that foster CoPs as facilitators for mutual TL among peers. A novel perspective on TL within CoPs is revealed, shifting focus from unidirectional manager–employee dynamics to peer-to-peer leadership emergence. By nurturing the conditions of role equality and shared narratives, organizations can pursue collective growth, empower employees, and propel organizational transformation through a network of decentralized leadership.

Keywords: Communities of Practice, Transformational Leader, Transformational Leadership, Role Equality

1. Introduction

Transformational leadership (TL) inspires individuals and communities to reach new heights through a shared sense of mission, stimulating learning and provoking new thinking (Hater and Bass, 1988). Traditionally, studies have focused on managers' driving employee performance through TL (Dung and Hai, 2020). However, leadership can emerge organically within communities, with shared goals and collective learning fostering change (Ospina and Sorenson, 2006), suggesting TL potential is for managers and employees. Although TL's effectiveness in response to uncertainty is known (Donate and Sánchez de Pablo, 2015), research often relies on follower evaluations and neglects the leader's perspective (Stock et al, 2023). This study bridges this gap by exploring how communities of practice (CoPs)—collaborative knowledge hubs—can nurture environment-dependent TL. CoPs facilitate innovation, cooperation, and trust, which are vital for TL (Gui, Lei and Le, 2024; Nguyen, Shen and Le, 2022; Scuotto et al, 2022). Studies have shown CoPs' effectiveness in developing leaders (Smith et al, 2018) and promoting informal learning (Zia et al, 2022), aligning well with TL's emphasis on growth and adaptability. Therefore, this study examines the specific elements CoPs can offer to cultivate TL among members. Through a comprehensive literature review, detailed analyses, and semi-structured interviews, it investigates how CoPs can empower individuals to become transformational leaders and drive positive changes within and beyond their communities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Transformational leadership

Recent research on TL focuses on (1) manager (supervisor) and employee interaction (improving performance and empowerment (Jensen, Potočník and Chaudhry, 2020), organizational culture (Nguyen et al, 2023), and organizational change (Faupel and Süß, 2019); (2) impact on individual employees self-efficacy (Gao, Murphy and Anderson, 2020), increased creativity (Nguyen et al, 2023), reduced negative emotions (Karatepe and Türkmen, 2023), and identity building (Mulla and Krishnan, 2022); and (3) promoting innovation through the application of knowledge in the organization (organizational learning; Mahmud, 2022), knowledge management (KM) (Gui, Lei and Le 2024), and knowledge sharing (Kim and Park, 2020).

2.1.1 TL: Beyond Manager-Employee Dynamics

TL involves inspiring individuals and communities to reach new heights through a shared vision, learning, and innovation. While extant research focuses on manager-employee interactions (Nugroho et al, 2020), TL's potential extends beyond this dyad. Organizational culture plays a crucial role in this process. TL fosters innovation-supportive (Jung et al, 2003) and HRD cultures, driving positive performance (Nguyen et al, 2023). Asbari (2020) describes TL as a "radar" for organizational realities and a "moral compass" guiding ethical choices. This visionary nature equips organizations for change amidst uncertainty (Faupel and Süß, 2019; Pesut, 2019).

However, several research gaps remain in this field. Understanding how individuals develop into transformational leaders is crucial. Although development needs have been recognized (Pesut, 2019), methods are often underexplored. Siganga (2019) emphasizes the importance of meeting higher human needs, such as self-esteem and actualization, for successful TL. Thus, clarifying the path to self-realization can help nurture effective, authentic transformational leaders.

2.1.2 *Transformational Leadership's Impact on Individual Employees*

Beyond manager-employee dynamics, TL directly benefits individual employees. Studies show that TL boosts self-efficacy (Gao, Murphy and Anderson, 2020) and creativity (Nguyen et al, 2023), mitigate negative emotions, reduces stress (Karatepe and Türkmen, 2023), prevent turnover and loneliness (Kloutsiniotis et al, 2022), and positively affects overall well-being (Schmitz et al, 2023). Recent research has investigated follower identity and its connection with TL. Mulla and Krishnan (2022) find that supervisors' TL increases recruits' self-transcendent values and reduces their self-enhancing values, fostering value congruence. Similarly, Bakker et al (2023) show that TL promotes follower strength and initiative, improving work engagement and performance. Djourova et al (2020) highlight the link between TL and well-being, demonstrating that inspirational motivation and individual attention directly affect self-efficacy, creating a pathway from leadership style to well-being through self-efficacy and resilience. These studies demonstrate managers' TL's positive impact on their employees. However, research on the effects of TL exhibited by employees, both on themselves and their surroundings, is lacking. Le and Lei (2018) explore the impact of TL and trust on knowledge sharing among members, hinting at the potential of employee-driven TL. Similarly, Alvesson (2020) emphasizes that leadership roles are not always neatly defined, and "followers" can also exhibit leadership qualities.

Therefore, future research should explore employee-driven TL and investigate its impact on individuals, teams, and organizational cultures. By recognizing the potential of leadership beyond traditional hierarchies, we can realize a broader spectrum of talent and create more empowered, thriving workplaces.

2.1.3 *Transformational Leadership and Intra-Organizational Knowledge: Fostering Innovation and Learning*

TL plays a crucial role in promoting innovation by applying internal knowledge. Research highlights its impact on learning, knowledge creation and practice, and organizational co-optation. Mahmud (2022) emphasizes the mediating effect of TL between learning culture and knowledge application, demonstrating its ability to bridge the gap between knowledge and practical use. Donate and Sánchez de Pablo (2015) propose a "knowledge-oriented leadership" that combines elements of both transformational and transactional styles, emphasizing the need for effective communication and motivation alongside KM practices. This suggests TL can handle KM's creation and communication, while transactional leadership can cater to storage and application.

Studies have explored the specific conditions under which TL fosters innovation. Gui, Lei, and Le (2024) show that while TL enhances innovation capability through knowledge management competence (KMC), its effectiveness depends on the organization's existing innovative climate. Similarly, Nguyen et al (2022) find that KMC and collaborative culture influence the impact of TL on different aspects of innovation capability. Le and Le (2023) demonstrate that TL's effect on exploratory innovation (seeking new ideas) is stronger than that on exploitative innovation (refining existing ideas).

Beyond innovation, TL also influences knowledge sharing, a crucial element of KM. Kim and Park (2020) assert that knowledge sharing mediates the relationship between TL and organizational learning, highlighting TL's ability to encourage knowledge exchange and collaborative learning. Shahzad et al (2022) further show that knowledge sharing strengthens the positive impact of TL on corporate performance, demonstrating its multifaceted contribution to organizational success.

However, TL's effectiveness depends on certain environmental factors. Trust between leadership, members, and among members is crucial (Le and Lei, 2018; Scuotto et al, 2022). Additionally, Gui, Lei and Le (2024) and Nguyen et al (2022) highlight the importance of fostering an innovative and collaborative culture to optimize TL's impact.

While the evidence is clear on TL's potential to enhance knowledge utilization and innovation, a gap exists in defining the specific environments and conditions in which it thrives. Future research must analyze this question, identifying the optimal contexts for utilizing TL's full potential to drive knowledge-based success within organizations.

2.2 Community of Practice

A CoP is a space where people with shared interests, problems, and enthusiasm for a subject come together to enhance their knowledge and skills through ongoing interaction (Wenger, 1998, p. 32). Learning in CoPs is structured into four elements: community, practice, meaning, and identity, which are “deeply interrelated and mutually defining” (p. 5) (Wenger, 1998).

In CoPs, it is “a means for the evolution of practice and the inclusion of newcomers, as well as for identity development and transformation” (Wenger, 1998; p. 13). Consequently, relevant research on CoP is mainly divided into (i) how it leads to identity development and transformation (e.g., knowledge sharing and creation) and (ii) what kind of identity development and transformation it has achieved (e.g., expertise and self-efficacy).

2.2.1 *Connecting Communities of Practice to Identity Development and Transformation*

CoPs are valuable tools for knowledge sharing and professional development within organizations. Their core role lies in facilitating informal learning and collaborating on shared interests. Jeon, Kim and Koh (2011) highlight the interplay of extrinsic and intrinsic motivations in driving knowledge sharing within CoPs. Budrytė and Vainauskienė (2023) further demonstrate the potential of virtual CoPs in promoting international knowledge exchange and remote collaboration. Furthermore, CoPs play a crucial role in shaping individual and community identities. Aljuwaiber (2016) emphasizes how CoPs foster informal professional learning, create shared identities, and give meaning to professional practice. This is particularly relevant for tacit knowledge, which thrives on dialogue and the informal learning processes often nurtured within CoPs.

Recent research has shifted focus toward the members, recognizing them as the driving force behind continuous knowledge creation and CoP evolution. Choi et al (2020) highlight the significance of CoPs in organizational innovation and improvement. They view CoP members as valuable assets and key players in KM, emphasizing their role in developing knowledge activities, enhancing competitiveness, and strengthening organizational culture. Similarly, Haas et al. (2021) investigated the factors influencing participation in virtual CoPs and found a positive correlation with work engagement. Bolisani et al (2021) explore how CoPs can act as agile responders to crises by fostering deeper connections, a sense of belonging, and community empowerment.

Overall, CoPs research is moving toward a more nuanced understanding of member interactions and their impact on individual and organizational development. Although studies have explored knowledge sharing and collaboration within CoPs, further research is required to examine the intricate dynamics of internal interactions among employees within these communities. Examining how CoPs influence individual identity development and transformation, particularly concerning professional identity, can offer valuable insights into maximizing the potential of these dynamic learning ecosystems.

2.2.2 *Identity Development and Transformation in Communities of Practice*

While research on CoPs in management often focuses on knowledge-sharing and collaboration, educational studies emphasize their impact on member identities. CoPs provide an ideal environment for building integrated knowledge and pedagogical expertise. This environment fosters critical thinking to prevent groupthink (Li et al, 2009), democratic cooperation (DePalma and Teague, 2008), and trust, which allows for failure and growth (Fitzgerald et al, 2023). Sadiq (2021) emphasizes the sense of unity and security CoPs offer in uncertain environments. McLaughlan (2021) identifies four key facilitators of CoP development for International Graduate Teaching Assistants: social connectedness, confident English teaching, pedagogical support, and self-efficacy in teaching.

Numerous studies demonstrate the positive impact of CoPs on member identities. Lee and Shaari (2012) highlight increased professionalism and autonomy, whereas Goodwin (2019) underscores the development of self-efficacy and career optimism. The post-pandemic context and challenges of building diverse societies have further highlighted the evolving role of CoPs. Ruzycki (2021) demonstrates how cross-disciplinary faculty CoPs foster resilience, adaptability, and an emergent learning framework. Similarly, Johnson (2023) demonstrates the effectiveness of CoPs in developing knowledge and resources for sustainable LGBTQ+ inclusivity.

In addition to individual growth, CoPs contribute to broader educational settings. Retna and Ng (2011) emphasize how mutual involvement facilitates acquiring new knowledge and transferable solutions beyond specific situations. Abedini, Abedin and Zowghi (2021) probe online CoPs for adult learners and find them independent, experience-centered, and self-motivated individuals seeking lifelong learning and professional outcomes.

2.3 Communities of Practice as Incubators for Transformational Leadership in Organizations

By reviewing the defining characteristics of transformational leaders (visionaries, facilitators of learning, and agents of change), we can observe how CoPs may develop transformational leaders.

First, they foster the qualities expected of transformational leaders. Schultze and Stabell (2004) emphasize that CoPs value internal learning, knowledge circulation, and action-oriented knowledge application. This aligns perfectly with the TL's focus on empowering individuals to tap into their inner potential and translate knowledge into meaningful actions. Second, CoPs offer an ideal environment for honing TL skills. Mulla and Krishnan (2022) highlight the importance of training for effective TL, whereas Pesut (2019) views it as a skill that requires development. Smith et al (2018) demonstrate that CoPs can serve as effective leadership development programs. Abedini, Abedin and Zowghi (2021) assert that online CoPs contribute toward lifelong learning and knowledge formation through shared experiences. Third, CoPs nurture essential traits of transformational leaders. Pesut (2019) and Djourova et al (2020) emphasize the need for leaders to cultivate foresight, resilience, and the ability to navigate change. Wenger (2000) defines CoPs as "a way for communities to contemplate their repertoire, identify hidden possibilities, and reveal the power to move forward." This introspective and future-oriented environment aligns perfectly with developing crucial leadership qualities. Finally, CoPs offer a unique space for peer-to-peer interaction, which Siganga (2019) identifies as a critical but understudied aspect of TL development. Unlike traditional hierarchical relationships, CoPs promote horizontal knowledge exchange and mutual learning, fostering employees' self-actualization of leadership potential.

3. Methodology

Descriptive and interpretive narrative approaches were used for data collection and analysis through a semi-structured interview survey. The narrative approach focuses on dialogue, revealing the discontinuity between the subject's story and experience (Sandelowski, 1991).

The suitability of this study for the growth of individuals in CoPs is evidenced in previous studies (Baran and Cagiltay, 2010; Fitzgerald et al, 2023). Moreover, they indicate an over-reliance on questionnaires as a shortfall in TL-related research progress identified by Stock et al. (2023), who state what behaviors produce the desired results to train leaders to be transformational. They emphasize the importance of TL research and mention that most research has merely been followers' evaluations of leaders through questionnaires. Hence, they suggest biases may exist in objective behavioral measures and questionnaires, and that coverage from other approaches is also needed to reduce bias. Thus, this qualitative study of the behavior of transformational leaders can be covered by other approaches.

3.1 Sampling

Regarding the sampling criteria, the study selected four individuals with transformational leader characteristics from four CoPs: painters, badminton, nail design, and IT gadgets. The CoPs were chosen based on the definition of CoP by Wenger (1998), with the criteria of coming together around a common interest or theme, ongoing activities to promote the development of that theme for at least two years, and a minimum of 10 participants. The selection of transformational leaders in the CoPs was then made through interviews with members of each CoP. In each CoP, random members were asked to describe transformational leader behavior (TLB) (Stock et al, 2023) and to "name someone who fits that characteristic." TLB is defined as teaching life lessons, introducing developmental opportunities, providing different perspectives, seeking perspectives, questioning critical assumptions, and speaking affirmatively (Stock et al, 2023). The interviews identified those who fit the TLB as painters (2), badminton (2), nail designers (1), and IT gadgets (1), of which one from each CoP was interviewed.

3.2 Data Collection

This study comprises several one-on-one semi-structured interviews with four transformation applicants from November to January 2023. Each interview lasted 1 hour and was conducted face-to-face or via an online call. The interviews were primarily reflective and used the interviewees' work and community events as guides. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the individual confirmed the content.

3.3 Data analysis

The interview data were analyzed using Steps for Coding and Theorization (SCAT) (Otani, 2011, author's translation). Additionally, in studies in education (Villeneuve and Hutchinson, 2013) and social work (Takahashi,

2016), data collection using the narrative approach and data analysis using SCAT allows the subject's theoretical descriptions. SCAT systematizes theories by extracting their commonalities and characteristics from the "theory descriptions" (Otani, 2008). The SCAT steps ensured each interview response was coded, relationships between codes were identified, and two common categories were derived. For validation, the results of the SCAT analysis were shared with the interviewees, and their views were sought. The results confirmed that no new categories were derived, and data were saturated.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

During the survey, the purpose and content of the study were explained to the participants, and their consent was obtained before the interviews. Personally identifiable information was anonymized and carefully collected to protect the participants' privacy, while audio and transcription data obtained from the survey were stored securely. After the data storage period, a specialized company properly disposed of the data.

4. Findings

4.1 Role-Based Equality

Unlike traditional organizations with predefined structures and assigned leadership roles, CoPs present a fascinating alternative. Interviews in this study reveal a key difference: in CoPs, members come first, and leadership emerges organically. While frameworks may exist, they serve as guidelines, not dictates, for the dynamic interplay of individuals. This "role-based equality" challenges the notion of leadership as a singular position. Knowledge creation and application in CoPs stem from egalitarian interactions in which all members contribute and share ownership. As expressed by interviewees, leadership "is not given, but shared," often surprising individuals chosen by their peers. These leaders do not view themselves as superior but as temporary facilitators fulfilling a specific need. They operate out of a sense of reciprocity and community spirit, recognizing the equal value of each member's role. One interviewee stated, "I organize events not out of responsibility but to give back what I get from the CoP." This mutual trust and respect foster a dynamic environment where leadership roles shift based on context and expertise. Members learn from and complement each other, continuously expanding their horizons while recognizing their limitations. Specifically, CoPs nurture a collective leadership model in which knowledge creation and transformation emanate from shared experiences and contributions.

4.2 Shared Narrative of Transformation

While Wenger's (1998) theory of CoPs emphasizes strengthening identity through professional development, this study offers a deeper insight: CoPs serve as mirrors for self-discovery. This quest is fueled by shared narratives of transformation. Members do not simply exchange information; they share personal stories of growth. These stories become anchors of "positive identity-shaping," demonstrating individual capabilities and impacting personal lives. In these narratives within CoPs, each member plays a crucial role in enriching the collective story through interactions, which include answering community questions, enhancing communication skills, and strengthening the overall narrative. The impact of individual stories extends beyond personal growth. They inspire others to form powerful mutual support systems. High-impact stories can elevate owners to temporary leadership roles, showcasing the dynamic nature of leadership in CoPs. Ultimately, weaving individual transformation stories fuels CoP's growth and evolution. This egalitarian sharing of experiences ensures knowledge creation and fosters a supportive environment where everyone feels empowered to contribute to and discover their potential. This study highlights the transformative power of CoPs beyond professional development. By providing platforms for sharing stories about individual journeys, CoPs have become catalysts for self-discovery, mutual inspiration, and collective growth.

5. Conclusion

This study examined creating a CoP environment that promotes TL among employees. The findings suggest that role-based equality and a shared narrative of transformation enable employees to practice TL, deepen self-understanding, and experience personal growth. This can lead to deeper employee connections, collective transformation, and a mutually trusting, evolving organization, benefiting CoPs, TL, and transformational learning.

The study also highlights the role of leadership in collaborative projects within CoPs, fostering self-discovery and

leadership roles not imposed by programs but through authentic CoP engagement. Additionally, the research reveals that TL and transactional leadership are crucial for knowledge creation and exchange, with individuals collectively demonstrating the power of collaboration. Further investigation into leveraging TL principles within CoPs is needed.

Acknowledgment

This work was supported by JST SPRING, Grant Number JPMJSP2101.

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