

## South East Leadership Academy Newsletter

November 2008

### 1. Editorial

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We are issuing this Special Edition of the newsletter in response to the success of the Leadership Academy's highly successful 'Leadership, Innovation and Communities of Practice' event, organised by the Open University. This proved to be yet another stimulating and enjoyable workshop, in no small part due to the quality of contributions, especially that of Etienne Wenger. It is not often that one is privileged to listen to someone who has coined a phrase that is now part of everyday language (at least in some circles!). Etienne's contribution was both informative and inspirational, sharing with us both the principles of communities of practice he has developed, as well as examples of communities of practice he has been involved with.

The rest of the day included contributions from people from both the academic and business world who have actually taken the principles of communities of practice and put them to work. The online discussions, set up and facilitated by the Open University, also allowed us to get an insight into both the advantages and challenges of nurturing communities of practice using virtual communication. This event was another prime example of what the Leadership Academy is trying to achieve – bringing cutting-edge thinking into the region and facilitating learning and debate amongst academics, practitioners and business advisers.

David Gray (Prof)  
Director, Leadership Academy for the South East



L-R; Sarah Robinson, Sue Peters, Professor David Gray, Professor Mark Fenton-O'Creevy, Etienne Wenger, Nigel Paine and Professor Colin Gray

### 2. The 'Leadership, Innovation & Communities of Practice' Workshop Mark Fenton-O'Creevy - Professor of Organisational Behaviour, the Open University Business School

The 'Leadership, Innovation and Communities of Practice' workshop was a virtual and real world event hosted by the Open University's Practice-based Professional Learning centre.

Although as academics we are very concerned with the processes of formal learning, we increasingly recognise that most learning (and the most important) happens informally in the course of our everyday practices in work and our wider lives. This learning happens through our membership of a variety of communities. Innovation is not mostly about sitting on your own and having good ideas. It is most often a process of importing and translating ideas from one setting onto another. Innovation arises out of interaction between individuals and groups with different ways of seeing the world and different ways of tackling problems.

The workshop, which combined a one day face-to-face event in Milton Keynes with a two week forum, brought together participants from the different worlds of higher education, business, and training to consider how communities of practice can foster innovation and learning in business. Participants discussed the kinds of leadership necessary to build and support such communities. Conversations were supported by inputs from a series of speakers with experience of supporting and developing communities of practice.

We heard first from Etienne Wenger who coined the term 'communities of practice' in his highly influential 1991 book (with Jean Lave)<sup>1</sup>. A quick check on Google scholar finds over 11,000 academic citations for this book and the term 'communities of practice' gets about 47 million hits on a plain Google search. As Etienne notes,

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*"Excellent speakers and between them they covered a good range of angles on the Communities of Practice topic."*

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*"Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. In a nutshell: Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly."*

Etienne spent some time introducing key ideas about communities of practice and how they can foster innovation before moving on to introduce us to his developing ideas on the nature of leadership in these communities. He organised his discussion around three core needs of communities of practice: sponsorship, support and structure and discussed how leadership (whether communal or individual) can be mobilized to bring these about. He also described the skills of what he calls 'social artists', people who are able to develop and nurture communities. Core skills he identified were: modelling a spirit of inquiry, building trust, inviting participation, connecting people, sharing leadership, enabling emergence, inspiring new meanings and opening identity.



Etienne Wenger

Next we heard from Nigel Paine. Nigel paid tribute to the impact Etienne's ideas had on him as head of learning at the BBC. Nigel described key lessons from his work in building and supporting technology-enabled communities of practice at the BBC. Key points he stressed included:-

- ❖ Let the groups form themselves and choose their own leaders
- ❖ Don't panic if it is slow to take off
- ❖ The climate is as important as the framework
- ❖ Recognise and celebrate success
- ❖ Share good practice formally and informally
- ❖ Don't label, over-complicate or over-analyze (e.g. we deliberately avoided using the term community of practice).

In the final presentation we heard from Sarah Robinson, Sue Peters and Lesley Swinn. They described the work of the LEAD project, a university-based programme for leaders of SMEs which deliberately sought to build a community of practice among these managers. Lesley is herself an SME owner and was able to describe vividly how the participation in the LEAD facilitated community of practice enables her to develop useful and effective leadership skills.

An article on this project can be found elsewhere in this issue and a video of the presentations is accessible at <http://tinyurl.com/COP-seeda>. Other resources from the event, including notes from the discussions can be found at <http://www.open.ac.uk/ldc08/>.

Participants split into smaller groups to discuss the ideas and experience of the morning session and, for some of them, of the first week of the online forum. Each group was facilitated by OU Business School tutors who also provided a written summary of the key points in each table's discussion. These key points were posted up on the website to stimulate and continue discussion during the second week of the online forum. The face-to-face day closed with a panel of the presenters fielding questions that arose from the table discussions and engaging in some pretty interactive exchanges as one would expect from a lively community of practice.

1 Lave, J. & Wenger E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.



Nigel Paine

### **3. Building Communities of Practice across SMEs: the case of LEAD**

**Sarah Robinson - Lecturer in Management, the Open University Business School**

This presentation was given by Sue Peters, LEAD Director - Institute for Entrepreneurship (IEED) Lancaster University Business School; Lesley Swinn: Director of Buy the House <http://www.buy-the-house.co.uk>, a participant on the LEAD programme; and Sarah Robinson: Lecturer in Management Learning Open University Business School, who researched and evaluated the programme.

The presentation focused on the case of LEAD, a management development programme run for SME owner managers at Lancaster University. It concentrated on how the course built up leadership skills and capacities among SME owner managers in the North East of England and how the building of communities of practice amongst the owner managers was a key factor in the success of the programme.

Sue gave the background to the programme, Lesley spoke of her experience on the programme and how it has helped her subsequently in developing her leadership abilities and then Sarah talked about what we had learned about the nature of SME leadership learning and the importance of building SME communities.

#### **Background – Sue Peters**

Standing for 'Leading Enterprise and Development', LEAD was initially developed as a two-year project at the Institute for Entrepreneurship and Enterprise Development (IEED), Lancaster University, and sponsored by an initial one million pound grant from the North West Development Agency. This funding was in response to a realisation that there was no leadership provision available for small and micro SMEs. Participants were selected on the basis of being the Managing Director/owner of the business, a leader/ 'decision maker' of an established business (five years or more) who demonstrated a desire to grow and develop their businesses.

The programme has continued after the initial funding with sustainability maintained through SME financial contributions to the programme cost. 140 SMEs over 7 cohorts (of 20 participants) have now gone through the programme.

In developing the programme, the course developers drew on SME development literature and the experience of IEED in researching and delivering SME support. The course design assumed that the target group: a) lacked content knowledge and information in order to develop their business and needed to build confidence in and a wider understanding of the nature of (SME) leadership, b) had little time in their everyday practice for reflective learning and c) were relatively isolated, with few people to learn from and with. Three areas and their associated learning processes were therefore identified as essential to the programme: 1) the need for knowledge and formal learning (informing); 2) guided reflective learning (applying knowledge and thinking back to their own context); and 3) peer interaction to enhance and support learning (comparing, contrasting and affirming). A strong focus was placed on the social nature of learning and on the importance of understanding and using the organisational context for learning.

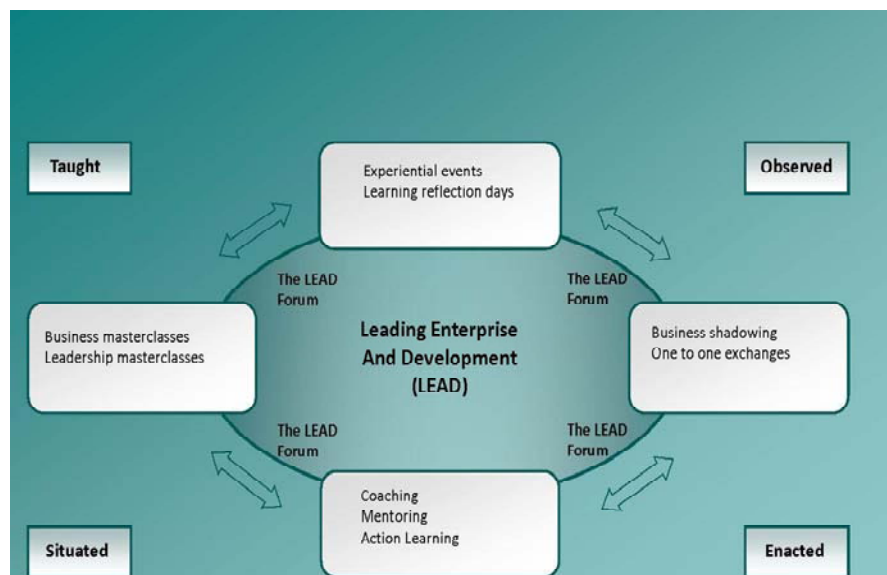


Sue Peters

These elements were integrated into a holistic design that centred on the business and the owner-manager themselves. The framework underpinning the programme design was:

- ❖ **Taught (formal) learning**
  - to heighten the salience of leadership
- ❖ **Observational learning**
  - providing opportunities for owner managers to observe a number of leadership styles
- ❖ **Enacted learning**
  - to refine the observed learning in action
- ❖ **Situated learning**
  - to put the enactment in a relevant context

A diagram illustrating how the different elements of the programme fit in this framework is given below.



The different components of the course are:

- ❖ Experiential learning event
- ❖ Masterclasses
- ❖ Action learning
- ❖ Coaching
- ❖ Mentoring
- ❖ Business shadowing and exchanges
- ❖ On-line forum

The different parts of the programme act to reinforce each other. The peer learning element is a very important part of the process, as reflected in the following quote: “[the forum] it’s a glue, it keeps everyone together. You meet up with the masterclasses; people are craving for another get together, something to share, to consolidate”.

### **The Experience of LEAD – Lesley Swinn**

Lesley is the owner-manager of an estate agency in Accrington. She told the story of her leadership learning journey, which started when she joined the LEAD programme on the first cohort four years ago. At that point she had recently left her corporate job to go into partnership with her husband and at that time she was on a very steep learning curve.

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*“It was very useful to hear  
the experience of real  
SME.”*

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Lesley described coming first for the LEAD interview for entry onto the programme feeling quite low and speaking with a very high voice, not feeling quite in control and afraid it would all fall apart. She used the now famous phrase ‘I’m an SME in Accrington - Get Me Out of Here!’

However, driving back after the interview, she felt much better as she realised that the course was exactly what she needed – a chance to develop and move on from her present state. Lesley attended everything and made copious notes of all the sessions, using her drive back to reflect on what she could take out of each session and apply back to the business. One of the first masterclasses affected her profoundly. It was by a man – Chris Moon – who had lost his limbs whilst mine-clearing in the army. His phrase - ‘don’t be a victim’ - really hit home. From that moment, Lesley realised she must make her situation and the business work for her. She immediately took charge of staff development within the business, taking many of the ideas and techniques back to use with her staff for their training and development. Very quickly Lesley got her confidence back, particularly through interacting with all the new people she met on the course. She learned many things from them which she took back into the business and she was also able to pass on her knowledge and experience from her previous career. For example, she took part in the shadowing and business exchanges with a man whose business was selling food supplements. She cast a professional eye around his warehouse and office arrangements and then spent the next two days advising how it could be rearranged for greater efficiency.

Lesley also picked up many ideas from other owner-managers, those she would never have thought of herself and would not have had the confidence to put into practice without others encouraging and advising her. An example of this was applying for business awards. Lesley has now twice been short-listed for small business awards and has been Estate Agent of the Year in Lancaster two years in a row.

Through the programme, she has made enduring links with other business owners in the region who she can phone for advice or just for a chat at anytime. She has also maintained close links with the university and she tutors on a course in Entrepreneurship. She has also built and developed new links and contacts within her local business community. She described how she and her husband Jonathon are now in some ways seen as 'the Posh and Becks' of Accrington. They take part in Dragon's Den events, are involved in charity fundraising and contribute to the business pages in the local paper. Lesley says that she feels totally different to four years ago and she has the pictures to prove it. She showed a promotional shot of herself and Jonathon for the local paper, both looking tense and tired and then the second picture taken a year ago shows them with new hairstyles and broader smiles as they show off their new premises and attractive colourful new branding.



Lesley Swinn

### Learning from LEAD – Sarah Robinson

The question then posed was, what can we learn from Lesley's story and the 60 plus other stories collected as part of the LEAD evaluation? What can we draw from the LEAD case study which tells us more about:

- ❖ the nature of SME (leadership) learning?
- ❖ ways of working with and developing SME clients?
- ❖ the building of communities of practice across SMEs?

By the end of the programme, participants reported being more confident in their own position, applying learning approaches from LEAD and being supported formally and informally by the LEAD peer network. Specific changes to their leadership practice included:

- ❖ being more proactive (in implementation)
- ❖ being less interventionist/stepping back
- ❖ delegating more, empowering and having more trust in staff
- ❖ having more patience – finding it easier to listen to others
- ❖ having more communication with staff
- ❖ identifying and making time for training and development
- ❖ having an increased awareness of the connection between training and development and business growth

An important element in these successes points to the interplay between leadership learning through the building of trust and relationships of reciprocity and the pooling and blending of formal and informal knowledge. What emerges from the LEAD study is the interaction between the formal learning, the guided reflection and the peer interaction in stimulating and sustaining the learning processes as reflected in the following quotes:

*It's the sum of all the small parts not one particular thing (Carla C4)*

*It was the LEAD Programme as a whole – a little bit from each part gradually changed my whole attitude to business and also myself personally (Nigel C4)*

The types of relationships built up and strengthened during the course come across quite clearly. Four main relationships are identifiable, namely:

**The relationship with the self**, e.g. accepting and developing oneself as a leader:

*'(it has) boosted my confidence. Has made me recognise my own skills and ability. You are a bit isolated in your own business. You have no measure, you don't realise how good you are' (Lisa C1)*

*'I have become much more confident as a leader, comfortable with the way I now lead' (TBC2)*

*'Changed my opinions of myself and my future' (DMC3)*

**The relationship with staff** (and partners), e.g. gaining respect of others and being able to lead staff better:

*'I feel that I am closer and more aware of other peoples' feelings and this has proved effective in helping them to achieve their goals' (Barry C2)*

*'I have developed my skills in dealing with people and helping them achieve better performance' (Jeff C4)*

*'I am more confident so I am able to deal with issues more easily. I give praise more readily, which has such a positive effect on my staff. I involve my staff in more decision-making, instead of doing it on my own' (JHC2)*

**The relationship with the business**, e.g. creating and developing the vision:

*'I realised that my passion really lies with my work as a ..... and I was running the other businesses because they were lucrative, but I hated doing it on a daily basis'. (Zoë C4)*

*'I feel more able to move my business forward' (JH C2)*

*'We will succeed in the future. We will get there. Rapid growth is a huge challenge which we are facing at the moment. I am definitely more confident now than I was before LEAD'. (RS C4)*

**The relationship with the wider SME community**, e.g. building up a peer network:

*'Since meeting my fellow cohorts and listening to their everyday workplace problems and sharing experiences I have returned to my company more confident and determined to make it successful, and question my own ability as the business owner and my leadership style' (Terry C4)*

*'Prior to meeting the others on my course I hadn't any real interaction with other business leaders on a personal level and didn't allow my personality to come through as much as I now do.' (Amy C4)*

The building and strengthening of these relationships helped to address what we have termed the SME leadership implementation challenge as reflected in the following quotes:

*"(I need) to get to grips with business management – its component parts – and apply my learning to my business." (Anna C2)*

*"I was seriously lacking confidence and direction for the business. I was unsure of what I would achieve from this programme (but) keen to address these issues." (Ash C3)*

Although participants knew when they entered the course that leadership was of high importance to the survival and success of their businesses, it was the confidence and help they received through the community of LEAD which helped them to implement and enact leadership within their businesses.



Sarah Robinson

## 4. Online Forum 1st – 15th October 2008

**Nigel Walton - Associate Lecturer, the Open University and Senior Lecturer in Innovation & Entrepreneurship, University of Worcester**

### 1.0 Introduction

The 'Leadership, Innovation and Communities of Practice' forum that took place between the 1<sup>st</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> October 2008 attracted eighty-nine registrations. Of these, twenty contributors discussed six themes relating to the afore-mentioned subject. This included a post-event (8<sup>th</sup> October face-to-face workshop) brainstorming discussion where the advantages and disadvantages of face-to-face and online communities of practice were considered.

The full range of content and ideas are explained in the main section of this report along with the technical issues relating to the online forum and some suggestions for future practice.

### 2.0 Structure & Content

The final structure and content of the online forum was as follows:

- ❖ Welcome and networking.
- ❖ An experience of innovating in a community of practice.
- ❖ Stories, case studies and learning.
- ❖ Communities of practice and leadership.
- ❖ Experiencing getting things started: how does one get communities of practice and innovation rolling?
- ❖ Understandings about knowledge.
- ❖ Where from here – post SEEDA workshop (1<sup>st</sup> October) brainstorming?

Within three days of the online forum going live, half of the twenty participants had introduced themselves and the other half had all submitted profiles before the face-to-face workshop on the 8<sup>th</sup> October 2008.

The first theme that was discussed in the forum involved the participants' experiences of innovation within a community of practice and whether longevity was an important issue. For example, once a project task has been completed and the project's useful life is over it is only natural that it should be dissolved. There was, however, an issue as to whether any objectives were identified and therefore ever achieved. This discussion ran from the 1<sup>st</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> October and acted as a useful *icebreaker* activity attracting twelve contributions.

A simultaneous theme was also being discussed entitled "Stories, Case Studies and Learning". This explored the role of language and anecdotes as tools of communication within communities of practice and ran from the 2<sup>nd</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> October attracting eleven entries.

Two of the other themes did not, however, attract a great deal of interest despite the importance one would normally attach to them. These were: "Communities of Practice and Leadership" and "Experience of Getting Things Started". Elements of these two themes were, however, interwoven with the other discussions.

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*"Relevant and interesting topic presented with a good model and practical example."*

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For example, the question of whether communities of practice should be designed and planned (formalised leadership) or whether they should emerge (ad hoc) was one of the discussions – not dissimilar to Mintzberg's theories of deliberate and emergent strategies.

Moreover, examples of how communities of practice and innovative projects were started at the Business Links in Sussex, Wessex and Berkshire were also considered - so these threads were not ignored.

The remaining two themes were discussed following the face-to-face workshop that was held at Walton Hall on the 8th October 2008. The Understandings About Knowledge theme ran from the 9th – 14th October and discussed the importance of communities of practice in extracting tacit and embedded knowledge and making it explicit. There were also linkages to the workshop discussions regarding the contestability of expertise.

A post-workshop brainstorming theme then evolved based on where one might go after the discussions that took place in the workshop groups at the face-to-face event on the 1st October. Key points included a belief that institutional entities are not communities of practice whereas some form of "learning leadership" may be required. Another key discussion point was how might communities best work i.e. is an online or face-to-face approach better. Most participants agreed that a face-to-face format was better but this was not always possible due to geography and physical distance and that an online format could act as a substitute or a facilitator. The question was also raised as to whether an online community could actually be classed as a community of practice. This theme attracted sixteen entries.



L-R; Professor Colin Gray, Professor David Gray and Professor Mark Fenton-O'Creevy

### 3.0 Technical and General Issues

There were some technical problems encountered in the forum. Nevertheless, the forum was largely well designed and laid-out and the support materials such as Articles, Workshop Papers (slides and notes) and the Workshop Presentation were excellent.

### 4.0 Overview and Recommendations

Looking at the readership numbers for the core threads (see below):

- ❖ Stories, case studies and learning – 252 reads
- ❖ Understandings about knowledge – 130 reads
- ❖ Where from here (brainstorming) – 178 reads

It would appear that there were a high number of 'lurkers', particularly during the early stages prior to the face-to-face workshop. A participation level of twenty could therefore be improved upon in two ways. First, the development of key themes during the second week might have been achieved by building on the ideas from the face-to-face workshop. For example, the compilation of a simple list by the "Table Moderators" covering the key ideas that attendees of the face-to-face workshop wanted to carry through into the online forum would have been very useful. Although written notes were provided, the online moderator would have welcomed a simple prioritised list of essential discussion ideas possibly based on the direct feedback of the face-to-face participants. The momentum that was generated by the event was therefore not fully exploited.

A longer period following the face-to-face workshop for the further development of ideas would also have been welcomed. One week appeared to be too short in the eyes of many participants. There was even a request to extend this indefinitely. One participant (Wilma Garvin) felt that there were some really good ideas that needed exploring and taking forward both within the group and within external networks. She has requested that the online forum remains open and that she would like to extend the discussions on *Facebook*.

## 5.0 Summary

Many of the issues encountered on the online forum are not untypical. However, the quality of the debate and discussion was high and considering the short nature of the forum and the fact that 'complete' strangers were being asked to interact in a public arena, the levels of participation were encouraging if not breathtaking. There would certainly appear to be a need for such an online forum possibly with a longer time-frame and with stronger linkages to 'real time' discussion ideas and live face-to-face events. This could be a useful way of developing a community of practice network using online delivery through a dedicated website where participants can join at will without the constraints of a two week window. The level of readership would certainly suggest a high level of interest and the virtual nature of the delivery is one way of overcoming physical distance.

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Academy Website*

[www.surrey.ac.uk/leadershipacademy](http://www.surrey.ac.uk/leadershipacademy)

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## 5. Feedback

The immediate feedback following the face-to-face event was very positive; in particular the high calibre of guest speakers was commended. It is a key aim of the Leadership Academy to bring together leading thinkers, Higher Education researchers, teachers and private providers of leadership and innovation. The workshop and the complementary online forum provided a platform to share experiences, case studies and best practice. Both aspects were designed to stimulate new ideas and ignite enthusiasm for greater collaboration.

It is important for the Leadership Academy to determine the impact that this event has engendered in order to fully exploit potential and encompass these values when planning future events. What improvements have you implemented as a direct result of the workshop and forum? Did the networking opportunities allow you to cultivate a mutually beneficial collaboration? Please email your examples or any other comments to [M.Henty@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:M.Henty@surrey.ac.uk).