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Life in a Volatile World

By Phil Ramsey

What does the year ahead hold for you and your school or centre? It can be hard to tell when the world in which you operate is unpredictable. Organisational experts describe this as a **VUCA context; the acronym standing for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous.**

No doubt, as a leader and teacher you know plenty about problem solving. Indeed, many schools and ECE services aim to teach children to be problem solvers. In a VUCA world this is much more difficult: the nature of the problem keeps changing (volatility); you can't be sure how others will respond (uncertainty); your solutions could have unexpected consequences (complexity); and even defining what the problem is difficult (ambiguity).

If even the most expert problem solvers are going to struggle to find a way forward, what can you and your team do? This leadership challenge has been looming for some time and a variety of organisations have been rethinking how they approach their work. What are some of the lessons learned?

Appreciation

There are limits to what can be achieved by problem solving that goes beyond the difficulties created by VUCA. Problem solving focuses the mind on what needs to be fixed. There is satisfaction in finding something that needs to be put right, then making that happen. But that gives a misleading impression. If you were to list all the problems facing you and your school or centre, listed in order of priority, it would be a daunting list. If you were confident enough, you might then proceed to solve them, knocking them off the list one by one. It would be satisfying, and perhaps give the impression that you were making progress. Perhaps one day you'll get to the bottom of the list, solve the last problem, and then life would be great.

In reality, when you approach life this way, the bottom of the list never comes. Problem solving takes time, new problems appear and 'solved' problems resurface. Lists of problems get longer. You have the impression that you are making a big difference, but over time you may be going backward.

If you are leading any team or organisation, what is likely to work better: spending 80% of your effort fixing problems and 20% ensuring things work well, or the reverse? Obviously, some problems need to be solved. Getting the balance right is the challenge. And this is what organisations of all sorts are discovering as they struggle to respond to VUCA. Problem solving, when out of balance, doesn't bring the results we need and also puts people under unhealthy levels of stress.

Further, it is hard on relationships. No one wants to think "I am the problem". We prefer to be the problem solver, not the cause. So we tend to look at others as the reason why things are going wrong, just at the time when we really need to work with them to make things better. Responding to complex challenges is really the work of teams rather than individuals.

While just about everyone has had a good experience of being part of a team, effective teamwork is not the norm. It doesn't happen routinely: people in groups usually have to make a deliberate effort to ensure that the team works well. And they need to put forth effort in a variety of areas.

Firstly, even though it is hard when everything seems to be going wrong, it is important to develop a culture of appreciation. Individuals, teams, and even larger organisations, can't be great at everything. That's just impossible. When we make it our default setting to pay attention to what is done well, we create a foundation that can be built upon. When we appreciate what is working and acknowledge one another's strengths we see and create opportunities for success.

Secondly, teams need to establish a sound structure. That includes having clear goals, appropriate membership, clear roles within the team, time to work together and norms about how members will behave. This, too, is difficult. It is easy to design a team structure that involves serious contradictions. A team might have goals that require them to speak openly with one another, sharing information about what needs to be done. At the same time, people with key information may not be given membership of the team. Or the group might establish norms regarding communication that result in people hiding information from one another because they fear the conflict that might result from sharing.

Thirdly, teams need to think carefully about their process: that is, how they do things. They need to establish approaches that allow them to make decisions, communicate with one another, hold one another accountable, and resolve conflicts that arise. For instance, if a team has made openness a norm, they need to develop an approach and supporting skills that allow people to express their opinions and raise their concerns in ways that are respectful of others in the team.

Building Teams

Working in these three areas - appreciative culture, team structure, and process - is something that needs to happen over time. Training, for instance, in process can give a team a head start on working well, but they will still make mistakes and continue to discover areas where they hadn't anticipated they would need a reliable process. Some of the contradictions that are built into team structure may not be immediately obvious. Structure needs to be talked about and periodically redesigned.

Within schools and centres, the senior leadership team (SLT) is typically the best place to start. Perhaps your SLT can start the year, not by listing problems, but by reflecting together on how to work more effectively as a team in a VUCA context.

Appreciating Forays

By Phil Ramsey

How do you bring about change in a complex system? Sometimes we imagine that things will only move after huge amounts of planning, negotiation, and preparation. An expert on organisational change, Barry Dym, has highlighted that this is often not the case. **Whole systems - a school or a centre - does not change until there is sufficient readiness to change throughout the organisation.** But readiness grows amongst people as small experiments, or 'forays', pile up over time.

Leaders can recognise and communicate to others the direction that they need to be moving in. Some decide they don't want to change. Others decide they will wait and see. But some think "I might try XYZ" and they undertake a small experiment in the new direction. Often they will try to keep it under the radar. Some experimenters undertake forays before the leader has said anything. They have thought about what lies ahead, realised there was an opportunity to try something and thought "Why not?"

Readiness to change is often invisible. Leaders may feel frustrated that they have talked about the need for change and nothing seems to be happening. Their attention is often drawn to those who are slow to move. Appreciative leaders make a point of finding out about the forays that are already taking place.

If you are a leader, once you find a foray what can you do to leverage it? How can you help it to grow from an "under the radar" experiment to something that might influence others to try a new way of working? Firstly, nurture the experiment. Give the innovator some encouragement, support, and resources that might help them to succeed. Coach the innovator, discussing how the foray can be made more effective. Secondly, when the foray has some success, publicise it and draw attention to its value.

Finally, recognise that teams are more powerful than individuals. Help innovators within the school or centre find one another and encourage them to consider how their independent efforts might be integrated.

As a leader, you'll find that an appreciative view of forays is not only encouraging to those throughout the organisation who are trying out new approaches, but it also draws your attention to what is working and reminds you of the progress you have already made.

Foray: to do or attempt something outside one's accustomed sphere: to enter into a new or different field or area of activity.

BOOK REVIEW:
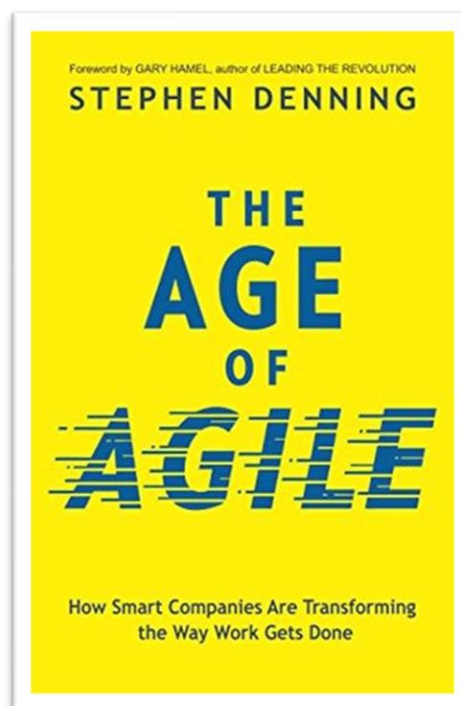# The Age of Agile

By Phil Ramsey

The last 20 years have seen an explosion of interest in new ways of organising work. Particularly in IT, companies like Amazon, Google and Uber have been trying to work out how they can become more "agile" and thus deal with a VUCA world. Steve Denning has played an important role in the Agile movement as an author, consultant and speaker. **In *The Age of Agile* Denning aims to distill down the essence of "Agile": the term commonly used to denote the approach to work that allows organisations to be responsive and effective despite rapid change and complexity.**

Key concepts that are explained on the basis of three laws: The Law of the Customer, The Law of the Small Team, and The Law of Networks. You might think that these would be nothing new for anyone; surely every business knows that customers are important! In reality, though, few organisations really organise themselves around bringing delight to their customers or making the most of teams.

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Denning writes well, explaining concepts with a mix of historical references (e.g. the Copernican Revolution) and recent business innovations (e.g. Siri, the digital personal assistant on many devices). He also creates some interesting thought experiments. For instance, think of all the things you can do with your mobile phone. Now imagine an organisation like Apple deciding that it wanted to invent a device that could do all those things. How much planning would be involved? How many prototypes would be needed? How long would it take? Approached in a standard 'bureaucratic' way, even the best organised and resourced company would never be able to develop a workable product. Yet your mobile phone exists: how come?

Apple invented a basic device, but it didn't even try to create all the applications that go on it. Instead, they created a system where small teams and individuals could contribute their work as part of a network. Which allows customers to personalise their phones in an infinite number of configurations.

Much of the book is aimed at the world of business rather than education and deals with business-specific challenges to creating an Agile workplace. Even so, it is a well-written and thought-provoking book, introducing the reader to an important theme affecting organisational life today. And it is challenging to consider how the principles described might be applied within schools and centres.

Wanted: Squeaky Wheels
By Phil Ramsey

There is a frustrating reality confronting leaders in organisations of all sorts. The complexity of the problems they face is too much for individuals to handle. We desperately need a variety of perspectives in order to understand what has to happen, and then people need to work together to make solutions work. In other words, teamwork is more valuable than ever.

But teamwork depends on people communicating. It isn't enough that our teams are diverse, or that they have been exposed to new ways of thinking. People still need to say what they think. They need to speak up, especially when they have views that are at odds with their teammates.

Have you been frustrated to find that someone has withheld vital information your team needed when making a decision? It is a common experience for leaders. But how common? Some experts estimate that 100% of people - that is, all of us - regularly choose to withhold information rather than speak up. We constantly censor ourselves, and often to the detriment of our teams.

What is going on? Most people will readily agree that speaking up is important, so why is it so difficult? And what can leaders do to make it easier? To find answers we need to look into the psychology of silence in teams, and this gets a little complicated.

Staying Quiet

Teamwork sounds like it should be great. It does, however, involve some hidden dangers. In particular, because teams are made up of people with different perspectives, there is always going to be disagreement. While you might hope that teams will find ways to deal with this disagreement, there are forces operating that make this difficult.

Consider what it is like when a colleague disagrees with you. A natural response is for you to think "I'm right and you are wrong." That response happens whether our views are based on solid evidence or not, sound reasoning or flaky speculation. We have to train ourselves to be open to others disagreeing with us. It won't happen by default; we need to make a determined effort to get beyond a couple of natural tendencies.

One tendency is to believe that we know the knowable facts: reality is what we can see. Other reasonable people should also see things the way we do, so it is surprising to us when people disagree. We don't assume that they have access to facts we don't, or a better way of understanding reality. A second tendency, especially when things go wrong, is to make judgements of others based on their character, while excusing ourselves on the basis of external forces. We minimise our own contribution to problems, while maximising the contribution of others.

When we teach people how to navigate through difficult conversations, we have to help people understand how natural these responses are, and spend time giving them strategies that help them avoid the traps they create. It is hard work, though, because the tendencies are natural, common to everyone, and strong.

So, by default, we tend to react badly to disagreement. Disagreement feels like it shouldn't happen because reasonable people could be expected to see things the way we do. And when they don't, it says something about flaws in their character. For that reason, it is embarrassing to have to deal with the disagreement, and a bit threatening as well. There is a risk involved, because clearly the person who doesn't agree isn't being completely rational. You are trying to help the team, and they seem to be determined to be an obstacle.

Of course, the embarrassment and threat gets worse when the unreasonable person is your boss or team leader. We think that speaking up is likely to cause offense, and we tend to over-estimate the amount of risk involved in doing so. Further, people who withhold important information from the team are unlikely to attribute blame to themselves for doing so. Instead they will look for someone else to hold responsible, and who better than the team leader. So at the same time as people are choosing to stay silent, they are coming up with excuses such as "[Insert your name here] wouldn't listen anyway."

When spelled out like this, we might see how our thinking about the dangers of speaking up aren't built on a strong foundation. Of course there are some interpersonal risks involved, but usually these are out-weighed by the benefits that come from improved team effectiveness when communication is healthy. The trouble is, our responses are thoughtfully measured; they happen at lightning speed and don't receive much reflective scrutiny.

Making it Safe

As a leader, when your team is talking, you have the challenge of paying attention at two levels. The surface level is the conversation about whatever subject the team has to address. The deeper level is the degree of 'safety' people feel about having the conversation. To what extent are people sharing their thoughts? On the surface, silence might mean there is general agreement with has been said. At the deeper level, silence might mean people feel it is too risky to say they disagree.

Caring for the deeper level will not happen by default. It takes deliberate and consistent effort by a leader. This may mean training to help team members understand the challenge of speaking up, and the folly of assumptions that give rise to the "I am right, you are wrong" response. Further, leaders cannot simply hope that good communication can result from a one-off inoculation with suitable training. You will need to repeatedly reinforce both the importance and value of speaking up along with reminders that people are safe to do so.

As challenges at your school or centre grow more complex, recognise that you need the full range of viewpoints different people provide. Don't underestimate the impact that your position of leader can have on people's readiness to talk. You may not think of yourself as an intimidating presence in the team; even so, people can use you as their excuse for staying silent. Treat silence as an indication that more action is needed to make your conversations safe.

Cultivating Readiness to Talk

By Phil Ramsey

What can leaders do to encourage team members to speak up? As the opening article in this newsletter discussed, it involves making people feel safe to talk when they see compelling reasons to stay silent. Leaders need to change the way team members weigh the risks involved in talk.

Think about how people on your team might finish this sentence:
"If I say what I think, others are going to think that I'm…"

It might be that people fear looking ignorant or incompetent. When you don't understand what the boss has said, is it because the boss has been unclear? Or that you just don't understand? If everyone else seems to understand, who wants to be the person that announces that they don't?

People also fear looking like they are being negative or disruptive. We value teamwork, so we don't want to look like the person who is slowing things down by pointing out problems.

Interestingly, research shows that leaders typically don't feel the same level of risk as people who are lower-status members of the organisation. That makes it hard for leaders to empathise with those who feel that they are at risk. Leaders perceive the work environment as 'safer' than those with less authority.

So, if you are a leader, don't assume that things are fine. You need to take action to establish the environment you need. One way to do this is with repeated messages that speaking up is not just OK, it is great! Messages like "there are no stupid questions" may seem over-worked, but they are important and can really make a difference. People need to be repeatedly reminded that you want to hear everyone's point of view, even if that view is negative.

When can you do this? Some leaders set aside time at the start of regular meetings, to spend two or three minutes discussing some aspect of how the team can work together. They seek to set the tone for the meeting to come, by highlighting some aspect of good team process. By keeping these 'set the tone' comments brief, they don't disrupt the meeting, nor do they feel repetitive. When meetings are held regularly, the messages build up in people's minds in a way that might move them to have a full share in conversations.

As well as setting the tone for meetings, it is important for leaders to be on the lookout for team members making the effort to speak up. First up efforts - termed "forays"- might be clumsy or poorly delivered; yet they indicate a team member is testing out the safety of an environment they have assumed to be risky. Don't penalise people who get it wrong. Express thanks. Ask people to expand on what they have said. Of course, leaders are not perfectly self-controlled. So, if you find yourself having reacted grumpily to a comment, be willing to be seen as fallible; apologise and look for what is valuable in the contribution that has been made.

Leaders have to be deliberate in their efforts to create team environments in which everyone feels safe. Keep experimenting with actions that encourage people to say what they are thinking, and pay attention to how team members respond to your efforts.

BOOK REVIEW:
Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations
By Phil Ramsey

Several years ago I read a couple of interesting articles by Barry Dym and Harry Huston, where they outlined their ideas on "organisational readiness to change". They provide a fresh perspective on leadership, and I was interested to see how they would develop these ideas in this book. The book uses examples from non-profit organisations, in which leaders often face complex challenges, and deals with leadership decision making in a very realistic way. While *Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations* is not particularly easy to read, it offers some valuable insights for educational leaders. Let's consider several.
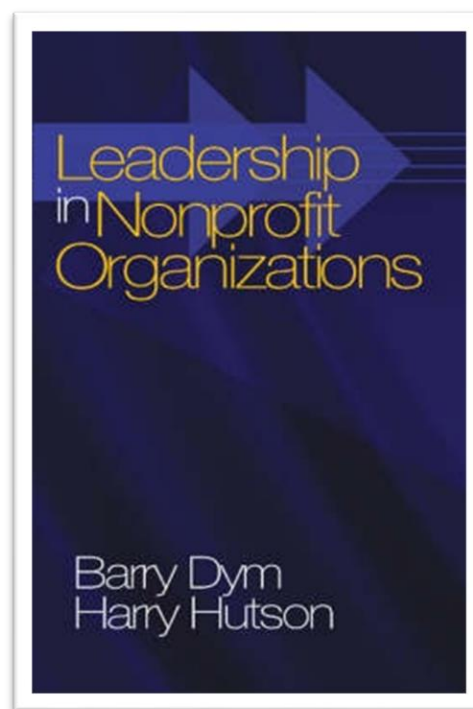
Dym and Huston review some of the main branches of leadership theory, such as the 'trait' approach which emphasises the role that character plays in leadership, and the 'situational' approach which focuses on how to adapt to different contexts. Rather than selecting the definition of leadership or the approach to leadership that they like best, they point out that leadership is complex and all leadership theories - even those that seemingly contradict each other - are based on some useful data. Consequently it makes sense for leaders to treat the full range of approaches as alternative lenses that are able to provide new ways of thinking about what they might need to do.

The book discusses how leadership can be thought of as creating alignment, and that problems occur when the elements of an organisation are not properly aligned. Firstly, the organisation needs to be strategically aligned with the actual needs that it seeks to serve. Those needs keep changing, so leaders need to stay on the watch for adjustments to this alignment. Leaders also need to give attention to aligning their personal goals with the goals of the organisation. Plus the structure, culture and policies need to be aligned, along with, of course, the thinking and objectives of the people who contribute to organisational success. Because organisations and their environments are dynamic, alignment is a goal that needs constant attention. Something always needs to be adjusted so that it fits better into the total picture.

Finally, leaders need to be aware that people, including leaders themselves, generally don't appreciate being constantly adjusted, and resistance to change is natural and even beneficial. Rather than becoming frustrated, leaders do well to develop a sensitivity to indications that people are ready for change. Readiness comes in various forms, each of which Dym and Huston discuss, along with how the ways leaders can respond to them. One form of readiness is a 'foray', when people experiment with new ways of acting. Curiosity and urgency are a different form of readiness, as are confusion and anxiety. Each form creates an opportunity for a leader to either build toward change in the future, or intervene to achieve greater alignment.

The book doesn't address schools or education in particular, so there is no prescription or recipe on how to lead. However, it provides leaders with plenty of food for thought along with a way of understanding change and resistance that might help you to make sense of what has and hasn't worked in the past.

Taming the Teacher Aides
By Phil Ramsey

A group of senior school leaders were distracted from a meeting. Out the window of the office, they could see a couple of teacher aides chatting to one another. What was the problem? "They should be paying more attention to (the children they are assigned to help), not talking to each other." The group started enthusiastically discussing how to remind the teacher aides of their responsibility.
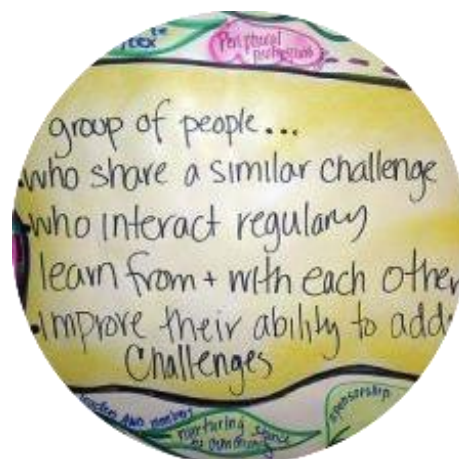
What the group was saying seemed reasonable. They were all dedicated professionals who knew that the work of the school was about education of children; that schools did not exist to meet the social needs of teachers, but rather were there for the benefit of students. They had all worked hard, both individually and as a Senior Leadership Team, to raise the standard of teaching and learning in the school. They held themselves to high standards of professional conduct and practice. Yet, the coach who was working with the team felt uncomfortable with what was being expressed, even though he believed in the importance of professionalism. What was the concern?

Many people who work with leaders and teams are sensitive to use of the word "should". It is often delivered in quite a 'parental' tone; those who use it may be surprised that they don't intend to sound controlling, but find that people bristle when told what they should do. Here the coach sensed something else: the team's certainty about what should be happening suggested they had idealised expectations that were taking them out of the moment.

The reason this newsletter is called *In the Moment* is because we make our best decisions when we are seeing things as they are now. Rather than resisting reality because we think it should be something else isn't really helpful. It encourages people to look backward to find out who to blame, when we need to be thinking about how to find solutions that move us forward.

Happily, the team were up to the challenge of looking at the situation in a new way. As they looked for an opportunity to move the situation forward - bringing teacher aide practice into alignment with the standards of the school - the team considered the role of social learning in the school.

Social Learning

We generally think of learning as something individuals do. This view makes sense; it's completely in line with what we experience. When we learn it feels like something we are personally choosing to do and doing for ourselves. Another perspective is that learning is a very social process. We learn in order to join or become more central to a community that is important to us, and we learn from people in those communities. Author and researcher Etienne Wenger has discussed the part "communities of practice" play in learning (see the book review in this newsletter).

"Communities of practice" are a naturally occurring phenomenon. People naturally form and join communities aimed at solving problems the members have in common. As part of those communities, people create 'practice'. They work out ways of dealing with the big issues they face and share those practices with each other. As people become more and more competent at these practices, they are seen and accepted as belonging and being closer to the core of the community. Think about communities to which you belong. What challenges do they try to address? What are some of the practices they share with one another? Who do others look to as being at the centre of the community?

The problem for organisations (including schools and centres) is that communities naturally form inside the organisation without necessarily going in the same direction as the organisation as a whole. University students, for instance, may share practices related to the challenge of "How to pass courses when you haven't got time to study everything that will be assessed." Such a challenge leads that community of students to develop practices that put them in conflict with their university.

The problem with naturally occurring phenomenon is that they happen whether you like it or not. Organisations often find themselves trying to stop something from happening when human nature is driving it to happen. The Senior Leadership Team realised that teacher aides share the same challenges so they will naturally form a community. Rather than going into battle, reprimanding each teacher aide individually, the team pondered what they might do to help this important community within the school, better align their purpose with the direction of the school as a whole.

When they started to consider the behaviour from a social learning and community of practice perspective, the team realised there was much more they could do to connect this community to the school in a positive way. This included opportunities for professional learning and development. What appealed to the team was that these actions were directly in line with the positive approach to leadership the team was committed to, while 'going into battle' was not.

Learning Lessons
What are the lessons we can learn from this experience? For one thing, seeing behaviour from a variety of perspective - including, in this case, through the lens of social learning - can provide important insights that inform our leadership. Secondly, switching perspective - or searching for a new lens - can be provoked if we pay attention to whether or not we are in the moment.

What's Your Trajectory?

By Phil Ramsey

How do you gauge someone's learning? If you take the view that learning is an individual process you might develop assessment activities that measure the amount of knowledge that someone possesses. But what if you switch to a social perspective, and see learning in relation to communities? According to Etienne Wenger, learning becomes a matter of movement and trajectory.

To understand this point of view, imagine (or even draw) three concentric circles to represent a community. The innermost circle represents the core of the community: the people who define what the community is for and help to set its direction and values. The next and largest ring of the circle is the general membership: people who are considered part of the community and who participate in its activity. The degree of participation and the strength of the membership can be represented by how close to the centre each person is. The third part, the outermost ring, is where you find people who aspire to be part of the community, but who have not yet met the requirements for membership.

People aren't static in a community. They may be busy learning the current practices of the community in order to move toward the centre. Or they may be experimenting with new practices that resolve the problems they and their colleagues face. They may have focused their attention on joining a different community and their trajectory is toward the outside.

This social perspective highlights the importance of the outer ring, the area Wenger refers to as "legitimised peripheral participation". Before people can become members of a community they have to spend time getting to know it, and participating in some of its activities, even though they are not yet recognised as members. Healthy communities realise that they need new members if they are going to be sustainable, but they don't want membership to be automatic. So they think carefully about what the requirements of membership are, and what someone has to be doing to be allowed to legitimately hang out on the periphery, before crossing the boundary into the community.

You can think about your school or centre as a community. Where would you place yourself: how close to the centre? Where do others see you in the community? How has this changed over the last year: what has been your trajectory? Have you crossed any boundaries? And how has learning been involved in this movement? What movement would you like to make in the future?

As well as setting the tone for meetings, it is important for leaders to be on the lookout for team members making the effort to speak up. First up efforts - termed "forays" - might be clumsy or poorly delivered; yet they indicate a team member is testing out the safety of an environment they have assumed to be risky. Don't penalise people who get it wrong. Express thanks. Ask people to expand on what they have said. Of course, leaders are not perfectly self-controlled. So, if you find yourself having reacted grumpily to a comment, be willing to be seen as fallible; apologise and look for what is valuable in the contribution that has been made.

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BOOK REVIEW:
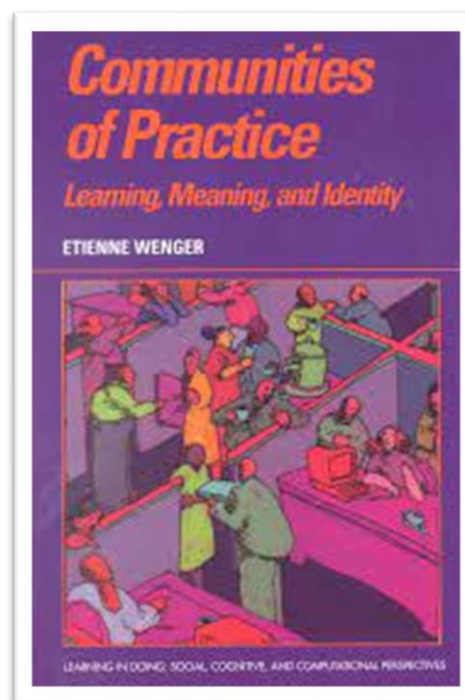# Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity

By Phil Ramsey

Etienne Wenger's book is a deliberate and thoughtful effort to give us a new lens through which to view learning. Wenger recognises that, for virtually all of us, learning is something we associate with classrooms, homework and training. When we think of learning in a new way, we see it happening in different places and different ways. That, in turn, allows us to influence it in ways we might not have realised were possible.

Wenger describes how learning is a natural process in the life of a community. We learn in order to become part of the community that gives us a sense of identity. We define ourselves according to the communities to which we belong, so learning is central to who we are and who we are trying to become.

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Many of the processes and behaviours that Wenger describes are easily recognisable. The book aims to help us see familiar things in a new and comprehensive way that offers practical guidance for individuals interested in their own learning, for communities who want to sustain their membership, and for organisations that have to coordinate the efforts of a range of interconnected communities in order to be successful.

Wenger's work requires careful reading; he is setting out a complex theory with an academic tone. He illustrates processes with reference to a claims processing department in an insurance company, showing how a rich variety of everyday behaviours are examples of social learning in action. While it is not an easy read and involves a lot of detailed work around definitions, Wenger is able to explain important concepts and crystallize essential elements of his thinking into key principles that can make you think about learning in new ways, even if you are an experienced educator.