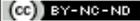

Communities of Practice

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History tells us that the four oldest professions are medicine, law, theology and education¹. Historically, professions emerged when individuals who were similarly devoted to excellence in the practice of a particular occupation formed fellowships or communities of practice. These communities of practice served a number of purposes, among the most important of which was to sustain the welfare of both the profession and its practitioners – the professionals. A great deal of modern work, from the many different professions in health care, to humanitarian workers, educators, artists and scientists of all types, to the crafts like carpentry and plumbing, to the myriad professions of modern business, most working adults are engaged in some sort of work that can be and often is, organized and enacted as a profession. The communities of practice that, formally or informally, comprise these professions continue to serve a variety of important purposes, including shaping the work experiences of professionals, yet their importance is often overlooked and neglected. Rediscovering these vital purposes may help to reinvigorate efforts to build up strong communities of practice.

William Sullivan describes a profession as “an occupation based upon formal knowledge and trained skill, organized in a collegial or guildlike way, and carried on in the spirit of service”². Sullivan emphasizes that, in addition to ensuring excellence in practice, “the great promise of a profession is the possibility of institutionalizing vocation.”

¹ Kimball, B. A. 1992. *True professional ideal in America: A history*,

² Sullivan, W. M. 2005. *Work and integrity* (2nd. ed.), San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, p. 16

That is the combination of these three elements creates the potential for professional work to become a vocation and for professionals to find in their work a life's calling.

First, a profession comprises specialized knowledge and skill. Undertaking a profession requires extensive training, education, and experience to acquire the specific, complex, and sophisticated ways of knowing, thinking and acting that are beyond the ken of most people. We seek the advice and treatment of physicians when we are sick or injured because they have the deep expertise that we lack that is required to help us gain wellness. Professions likewise require extensive experience to be able to apply that knowledge and skill with great competence and proficiency. Acquiring this specialized knowledge and skill, and then gaining proficiency in their use, creates the potential for an ongoing and profoundly satisfying sense of personal accomplishment. Friedson emphasizes that in genuine professional work, the craft itself is a focus of attention. Professional work is entails a focus on the quality of the performance itself and the joys that accompany attainment of successively greater levels of knowledge, skill, and practice.³

Second, a profession is always focused on using that specialized knowledge and skill for the benefit of others. The word "profession" derived from the fact that practitioners freely professed or vowed to enact the their knowledge and skill for the good of others. True

³ Freidson, E. 2001. *Professionalism: The third logic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

professionals certainly can and should be paid, but professionals do not seek only their own self-interest. Rather, the significance of a profession, unlike work pursued primarily as a source of monetary gain, derives from the fact that it seeks to make important, positive contributions to the larger social whole.⁴ Of course, even casual observation suggests that some professionals and perhaps some professions have abandoned or renounced this element, but in so doing they have also forsaken the possibility for work to become a calling.

Lastly, a profession is organized into a collegial, mutually supportive community of individuals committed to excellence in practice and in service to others. This community of practice plays several vital functions in the lives of professionals and in the practice of the profession, and it is these vital functions that I want to address here. My main objective is to emphasize the importance of a community of practice for ensuring the well-being of both the profession and its professionals. Without a vibrant community of practice, the challenges of enacting a profession will take its toll on the individuals to whom the care, growth, and vibrancy of its specialized knowledge, skill and practice have been entrusted.

Some of the functions of communities of practice work to sustain, nurture, and advance the vitality of the profession itself. These functions center on safeguarding the profession. Other functions work to sustain, nurture, and advance the vitality of professionals and their

⁴ Sullivan, *op. sit*

practice. These functions center on safeguarding the members of the community. A more nuanced understanding of all these functions will, I hope, highlight the importance of nurturing vibrant communities of practice.

Safeguarding the profession

All professions are established on a set of values – principles and norms that define what constitutes proper thought and behavior – and common ideals – conceptions of and aspirations to excellence – to which all members are mutually devoted. Therefore, one of the most important of functions of the community of practice is to pronounce, affirm, and promulgate these values and ideals and to ensure that the practices of member professionals uphold and fulfill them. The community of practice, through a variety of rituals, ceremonies, and pronouncements (words and actions of leaders, official declarations and publications, meetings of members, recognition of outstanding practitioners, etc.) continuously defines and reinforces the values and ideals that constitute its very essence. The Hippocratic oath of physicians is just one salient example. These values and ideals establish the culture that defines, shapes, and guides the practice and enactment of the profession. These values and ideals are also extremely important for imbuing the work undertaken by professionals with meaning and significance.

A second way that communities of practice safeguard the profession is to establish standards of excellence in

talent, temperament, and training to which all members are held. These standard of excellence are set at very high levels and they are correspondingly difficult to achieve because the profession seeks to ensure that its practitioners are highly competent and extraordinarily capable of delivering on the profession's promise to benefit others. The community also acts to ensure that the knowledge, skill and practice of its members continue to develop and grow. Professions constantly seek ways to do more, to gain new knowledge and develop new skills, and to provide richer benefit to those that the profession serves. To remain vibrant, professions must organic, growing entities, and communities of practice ensure that progress and development are continued.

A third important function of communities of practice is to protect the profession from encroachment by interlopers. These communities work diligently to prevent untrained or incompetent individuals from attempting to engage in the profession and they also work to ensure that charlatans are vigorously prosecuted. These activities are not merely or even mainly to protect the status and income of members. Given the vow to serve others that is at the heart of a profession, communities of practice work actively and resolutely to ensure that no one is harmed by imposters. Vigilance against interlopers ensures and protects the primary aim of the profession – expertise and skill in service of others.

Safeguard the members

Communities of practice also function to support and foster the well-being and practice of their members. These communities achieve this through mentoring members as they develop and by providing advice & counsel as members practice. Mentoring helps to ensure that members have the necessary knowledge and skill so that they can practice proficiently and thereby experience a deep sense of mastery that creates a sense of fulfillment in work. Advice and counsel provide the instrumental help and support members need when they face challenges. The practice of a professional can be deeply rewarding, but at times it is fraught with complexity, difficulty, and tribulation. Communities of practice provide the ongoing support members need to practice with excellence even in the most trying times.

Another important function of communities of practice is to provide care & comfort for members, especially during periods of challenge or crisis. Care and comfort are focused on the well-being of the professional. The practice of a profession is a deeply personal experience. Professionals invest not only their time and talent, but also their emotions. That is, care and comfort are in no way dependent upon the skill and proficiency of the member but, rather, are undertaken simply because each person's life and well-being are held up as intrinsic life goods.

A fourth important function is related to care and comfort: protection from threats. Communities of practice are

proactive in searching out threats and then providing means for defending members against those threats. These threats could include dangers to health and wellness, but more modern threats include burnout and over-investment in work.

Membership

Perhaps the most important function of communities is the sense of belongingness, or what Wendell Berry calls "membership," that they create. Psychologists assert that belongingness is one of the few, fundamental needs that all human beings are subject to⁵. We simply must have our need for belongingness met or we will not survive or thrive. Belongingness is fundamental and foundational to developing the sense of self or identity that is the essence of a calling. It is also fundamental and foundational to the formation of the community itself. That is, community *is* membership. Membership is, therefore, important because it safeguards both the profession and the members.

Membership is a complex and nuanced idea. It comprises mutuality and devotion, as well as unconditional acceptance. Members are honored and respected simply because of who they are and because they belong to the community. It entails caring for, protecting, and nurturing each member. Membership requires that members honor and respect, care for,

⁵ Baumeiseter, R F., & leary, M. R. 1995. The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117: 497-529.

protect, and nourish each other. This is mutuality – giving and receiving – and devotion – loyalty through good and bad.

Membership acknowledges and nurtures the holistic unity that forms the unity and commonweal of the profession. It seeks to sustain the common good and the individual good,

Membership requires a steadfast fidelity to the values and ideals of the profession and to the members of the professions. This points to one of the most challenging aspects of membership is that it entails goodwill and fealty to all members, regardless of whether they benefit or harm the community. Wendell Berry notes that “the community must always be marred by members who are indifferent to it or against it, who are nonetheless its members and nonetheless essential to it⁶.”

William Sullivan emphasizes that the great promise of professions is the prospect of work that becomes a vocation, a life calling. It is through a deep sense of membership that the work of a profession can acquire both the deep, common meaning and the individual expression that are prerequisites for a calling. For work to become a calling, it must involve the pursuit of a higher, transcendent purpose and quest for noble ideals that can only be experienced in a community. But for work to be a calling also requires that each individual experiences their own unique, self-expression of this pursuit and quest. That is, work as a calling is both a common and

individual, shared and idiosyncratic, mutual and personal enactment of a particular domain of work, what I have been calling a profession.

I will close with an excerpt from *Healing*, a poem by Wendell Berry, that captures the essence of this kind of work. It also captures the importance of community for experiencing work at its best.

*Good work finds the way between pride and despair.
It graces with health. It heals with grace.
It preserves the given so that it remains a gift.
By it, we lose loneliness.
We clasp the hands of those who go before us, and the
hands of those who come after us;
We enter the little circle of each other's arms, and the
larger circle of lovers whose hands are joined in a dance,
and the larger circle of all creatures, passing in and out of
life, who move also in a dance, to a music so subtle and
vast that no ear hears it except in fragments.*



enjoy work.

⁶ Wendell Berry. 2000. *Jayber Crow*, NY: Counterpoint, p. 205