Supporting Shop Stewards with Communities of Practice

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Abstract[1]

The paper *Supporting Shop Stewards with Communities of Practice (CoP)* aims to demonstrate new ways to tap the full negotiation potential of shop stewards, which requires a new understanding of roles: shop stewards need to act as "social entrepreneurs" rather than as "reactive employee representatives". They need to

- have a clear request and goal;
- assess the bargaining situation from the point of view of a systemic coach;
- exchange with their peers on promising strategies in the framework of communities of practice;
- identify the sub-system where they can create the biggest impact and develop concrete intervention strategies.

Introducing a new systemic paradigm, this paper seeks to open up a new dimension of co-determination for shop stewards.

Introduction

Work relations change – this has always been so. What is new is the speed of change as a result of increasingly complex market environments. Digitalisation, the new quality of globalisation, and the opening of markets, the individualisation of customer demands and shorter product life cycles make a high rate of innovation prerequisite to staying competitive. This is not only true for products but also for production processes and management. VUCA is the new secret to success: volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity are the new requirements leading companies and their employees need to fulfil (Grannemann 2015). Certainly, this development poses radically new challenges to employees' representative bodies that need to ask themselves whether or not they also should radically change their organisational setup.

At the first biennial conference in 2016 on the topic of co-determination – "What does co-determination do? What can we learn from research?" –, Michael Guggemos, speaker of Hans Boeckler Foundation, stated that it was not enough to defend the status quo. In view of the increasingly complex challenges, co-determination also needs to be further developed. Political scientist Anke Hassel puts forward a similar argument by pointing out the need to "adapt the historically rooted institution of co-determination to changed circumstances."[2] Thomas Haipeter from the University of Duisburg-Essen proposes how IG Metall could change its organisational body and counteract current management strategies. His suggestions are based on the "Besser statt Billiger" campaign ("better instead of cheaper"). According to Haipeter, a proactive approach is needed and shop stewards would need to be trained to adopt such a proactive approach. One important element of this new approach could be case management that is supported by external consultants who work closely with trade unions. Consultants and shop stewards should be organised as networks.[3]

Employees' representatives are aware of the need for a paradigm shift within their own organisational setup. Big changes, however, cannot be achieved with big leaps. It rather takes small steps. One such step could be to organise trade union work in networks and communities of practice (CoP). The present paper aims to demonstrate how CoP can help employees' representatives to meet the challenges of the VUCA world and presents GEDIFO,[4] an initiative by the Vienna Chamber of Labour (AK Wien)[5].

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[1] The following considerations are based on a book project; the book will be ready for publication in autumn 2018.
[2] See "Mitbestimmung im Dialog mit der Wissenschaft", https://www.boeckler.de/veranstaltung_65214.htm.
[3] Thomas Haipeter: Recent Trends of Works Councils' Codetermination: Challenges and Responses, https://www.boeckler.de/pdf/v_2016_05_12_haipeter.pdf, S. 8.
[4] GEDIFO (short for „Gesellschaftspolitisches Diskussionsforum" or socio-political discussion forum) is a unique pilot initiative by the Vienna Chamber of Labour (AK Wien) that promotes cross-organizational learning for works councils of corporate and public sector organizations.
[5] The Chamber of Labour is the legal representative body of employees in Austria.

Agile Management – The Management Principle in the VUCA World

The VUCA world asks for a leadership principle that looks beyond command and control. Agile management aims to make sure that all decisions are made at the interface where the organisation interacts with her clients. This has severe effects on work relations since "Agile organisations have understood that radical orientation towards customers goes hand in hand with radical orientation towards employees" (Häusling et al, 2014). This results in delegating responsibility top down on the basis of trust, transparency and open failure culture. Hierarchy no longer determines what is to be done but contacts and connections that are needed for agile cooperations are created and nurtured in network structues. Long-term and highly complex project plans are replaced by short-term planning and implementation cycles that deliver concrete results ("prototyping"). This is how mistakes can be corrected at an early stage; fixed priorities are questioned at regular intervals and re-set if necessary (Figure 1).

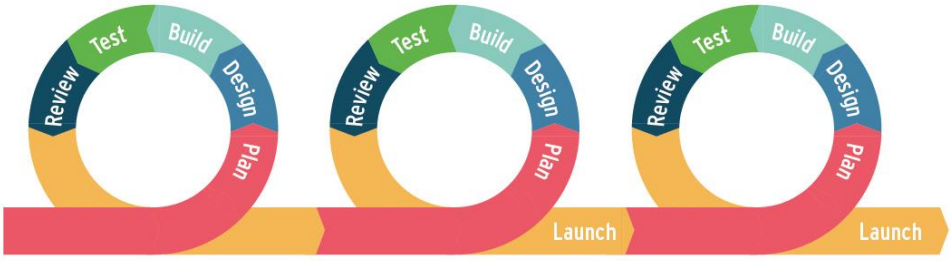

Figure 1: Agile Management

Yet another developmemt that is closely related to agile management is the lean start-up approach as a general organisational principle in companies. This approach, too, aims to keep the product development cycle as short as possible by receiving early customer feedback. Insights gained will then initiate the next product development cycle. Agile management and the lean start-up approach are both rooted in a learning approach called double-loop learning (Agyris & Schön, 1996), which was developed more than 20 years ago (Figure 2).

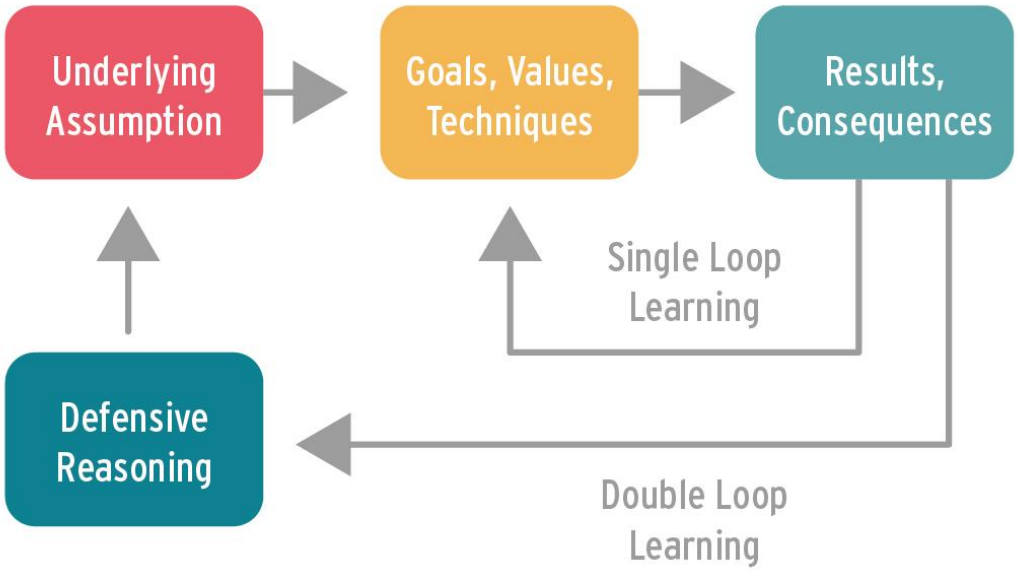

Figure 2: Double Loop Learning, Source: Merl/Schönbauer (2014)

According to this learning approach, we learn by processing the effects of specific actions. In the simplest scenario, the learning goal is already reached in the first step and needs no further iniatiatives. If you apply the trial and error method, however, the error or "mistake" is an important element of the learning process: on the basis of customer feedback it is decided whether or not one is still on the right path. If small adjustments are

needed – in terms of targets or strategies, for instance – we talk about a "simple learning loop" where priorities stay the same and the how and the what are newly specified. This is different in "double learning loop" where the undertaking as such is questioned: are the basic assumptions still accepted or are they challenged? In that case it makes little sense to keep to the original approach.

VUCA – volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiquity! Embedded in a new leadership philosophy, organisations show more self-responsibility, self-empowerment and entrepreneurship of employees. Shop stewards operate in this VUCA world, too. They also have to learn to think like entrepreneurs. To do so, they need new methods and tools.

Shop Stewards as Social Entrepreneurs

Shop stewards do not produce anything, nor do they offer traditional services. How should shop stewards act like entrepreneurs? Doesn't it require a market that corrects and regulates supply and demand? Can works council elections that take place at the interval of several years replace such a market? An extended definition of customer might be needed here.

Agile means orientating one's own activities towards customers at as short notice as possible. Shop stewards need to do the same when it comes to their "stakeholders" – as they do not serve customers in the traditional sense. Shop stewards' stakeholders are social systems and sub-cultures that are directly or indirectly affected by their activities. The highest goal of shop stewards is to serve the interests of their "primary stakeholder" – the employees. Accordingly, shop stewards can act as social entrepreneurs in the following fields of action:

1. *Works Council*: In many cases, shop stewards start to act as entrepreneurs in their "home system" where they have to do a lot of persuading.

2. *Employees:* In organisations, internal communication mainly takes place in personal networks. Shop stewards need to connect with the most important agents within these networks (opinion leaders, opinion brokers) and integrate them in the decision-making process.[6]

3. *Management*: Most of the time shop stewards have to address management when they want to bring about change. When addressing managers, they have to consider their decision-making powers. For example, country managers of big groups only have limited decision-making power; in that case they might have to address the headquarters directly.

4. *Supervisory Board*: Even if shareholders' representatives have the majority in the Supervisory Board, they need not necessarily pursue the same interests. This offers the possibility to create "silent" alliances or to find allies among management if they have the same (location-based) interests.

5. *The Public:* Usually, shop stewards try to solve their tasks and conflicts internally. Even if there are massive conflicts of interest between management and works councils, going public is a last resort. When playing on the media organ, they have a broad range of possibilities, from specific indiscretion to carefully planned campaigns that can be run for a longer period of time.

6. *Chamber of Labour and Trade Union:* Shop stewards have to aim to improve their conditions by means of supra-organisational representative bodies. For example, they can contribute to the programme and agenda of trade unions.

[6] Ideally, a social network analysis provides an overview.

Social entrepreneurship of shop stewards needs sociotopes where it can become effective. Sometimes it may be necessary to take action in several subsystems in parallel – for example, it may be necessary to give dynamics to negotiations that got stuck by means of work gatherings and accompanying public campaigns. Usually, however, negotiations help to balance the interests between employers and employees and such additional instruments are not needed.

Social Entrepreneurship in Negotiations

Rules usual increase the chance for success in negotiations. The Harvard concept, which is known as *the* fact-related negotiation technique, offers such a set of rules. The concept considers the mix of substance and relationship as the main problem and suggests that negotiators stick to the facts and at the same time be soft and respectful when dealing with the other party.

Four postulations should help:

1. *Substance-related discussions:* No one acts irrationally; each party follows their own logic. A change in perspective allows the parties to see the subject of negotiation from the other party's point of view.

2. *Clarifying the interests behind individual negotiating positions:* Once interests are open and clearly communicated ("Why is this so important to you?"), alternative and hidden solutions may be found.

3. *Opening up new possibilities:* The more options were identified beforehand – also by looking at the situation from the opponents' perspective –, the bigger the space for negotiating becomes and the more likely it is that solutions can be found.

4. *Developing and communicating decision-making criteria:* Whether or not negotiations are successful will be decided by each party on the basis of their own criteria that should be transparent from the start. When revealing these criteria it can be clarified what would be a "fair" result for all parties.

With these postulations, the Harvard concept more or less follows Habermas' discourse ethics: truth is discovered through discourse. This can only happen if the negotiating partners trust each other, reveal all relevant information and do not try to persuade the other party. The only thing that counts is the better argument.

Conversations will not always follow these rules. What counts are the win-win expectations: If both parties expect to equally benefit from transparent and confidential interaction, they will follow the rules of Habermas' discourse ethics, just like in newsgroups or in a family pow-wow. Likewise, networks are based on confidential exchange in the long run. And certainly employer-employee relations can be organised according to the rules of discourse ethics.

Negotiations will often not follow the principles of discourse ethics, though. Actually, management's guiding principle is maximum satisfaction of owners' interests, and the related career motto of supervisory boards and managing directors is "Those who have the money set the rules." Shop stewards are well advised to start off at another point of the Harvard concept, namely the change of perspectives. To change perspective, they at least need to have assumptions on how their counterpart might see the situation as they do not reveal their real motifs. Shop stewards need to be able to put themselves into the shoes of management. Only by making assumptions and by constructing potential truths will they negotiate in a most effective way.

Traditionally, shop stewards first aim to convince the employer of their logic and to play along with them. For example, they aim to convince employers of the fact that high workload leads to exhaustion, that private and family life may suffer from this, that employees lack the required resilience to cope with it, etc. However, this

usually does not cause irritation in employers – simply because it does not yet have any negative effect on their economic targets. According to a mere business logic, action only needs to be taken in the case of sick leaves, if quality suffers from the lack of motivation and concentration, and if important qualifications get lost when people leave the organisation.

Over the years, shop stewards have learned what makes employers tick. They have developed negotiation routines that raise win-win fantasies. They intuitively follow a systemic-constructivist approach, by trying to "see through" their counterparts in order to hit the weak spot. There is a whole professional group that is based on the business of "seeing through others": systemic consulting services (Schönbauer 2003). Systemic consultants view and analyse an organisation from a bird's eye view and try to decode its logic. To do so, they need to get information from the organisation itself, for example by conducting interviews. In analogy with the basic principles of double-loop learning systemic change processes take place in the following steps (Figure 3):

1. *Collect:* First, information is gathered.
2. *Build hypotheses:* Hypotheses are formed about the logic of the organisation and the specific sub-system (management…).
3. *Design intervention:* On the basis of these hypotheses, actions (interventions) are planned that should steer the organisation (sub-system) into the preferred direction.[7]
4. *Execute:* Action is taken (intervention), meaning the planned measures are implemented.[8]
5. *Collect and evaluate:* Finally, the effect of the intervention is evaluated and provides the basis for the next intervention loop.

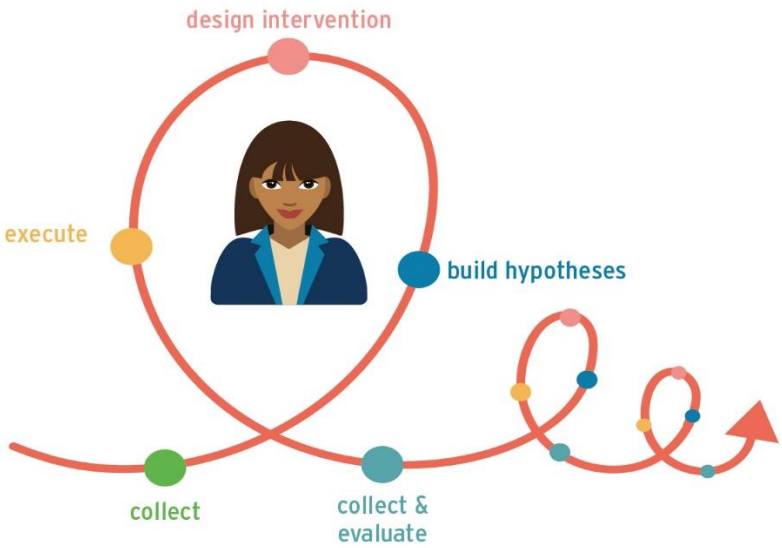

Figure 3: Systemic intervention

Königswieser & Exner (1998), two main representatives of systemic coaching, explicitly point out the importance of autonomous "staff work". Accordingly, systemic consultants need to stay among themselves when doing their "hidden investigations", i.e., collective reflection, formulation of hypotheses and planning of interventions, in order to be able to work professionally. This is how they can keep the necessary distance (Wimmer, 1992)." Why should this method be limited to change management? As will be demonstrated hereinafter, this method is very well suited for working with shop stewards in CoP.

[7] In change management projects the "envisaged direction" is specified in regular sessions with the host (see Schönbauer, 2003, p. 56ff.).
[8] In change management projects project groups play an important role here as they serve as setting where interventions are taken to "rehearse" the change process (see Seliger, 2017).

Strategic Planning in Communities of Practice

Just like systemic consultants need a closed social system to do their "staff work", shop stewards need a platform where they can exchange their strategies. Enter communities of practice (CoP) that are based on the basic principles of organisational learning. CoP are characterised by three basic elements:

1. *The domaine*: Participants want to effect change in a certain field – for example organisational health matters. They hope to be inspired as a result of sharing with others.
2. *The community:* The community forms the basis that motivates and organises external support and provides help and advice.
3. *The practice*: Participation in a CoP is practice-oriented. Members want to acquire the knowledge and inspirations that can help them make practical steps in their endeavours. A repertoire of possible approaches, external resources, methods and tools is developed that can be used by all participants.

CoP are partly projects, partly networks (Figure 4). Plans of participants are supported by the CoP so that they can have a most effective impact on other systems, subsystems or projects – for example, on management, the supervisory board, employees, etc. For CoP to function, they need to fulfil the same criteria as social networks. According to Boos et al (1992), networks are characterised as follows – these characteristics are also true for CoP:

1. *Basic intention/reciprocal exchange* defined as domain, hoping to get a fair deal: give and take need to be balanced;
2. *Current motive* that allows a network to grow around its basic intention; the basic intention can be the need for healthy working conditions and alarming survey results can be the reason to kick off a network (a CoP);
3. *Relationship potential*, such as knowledge, information and power are the true currency within networks.

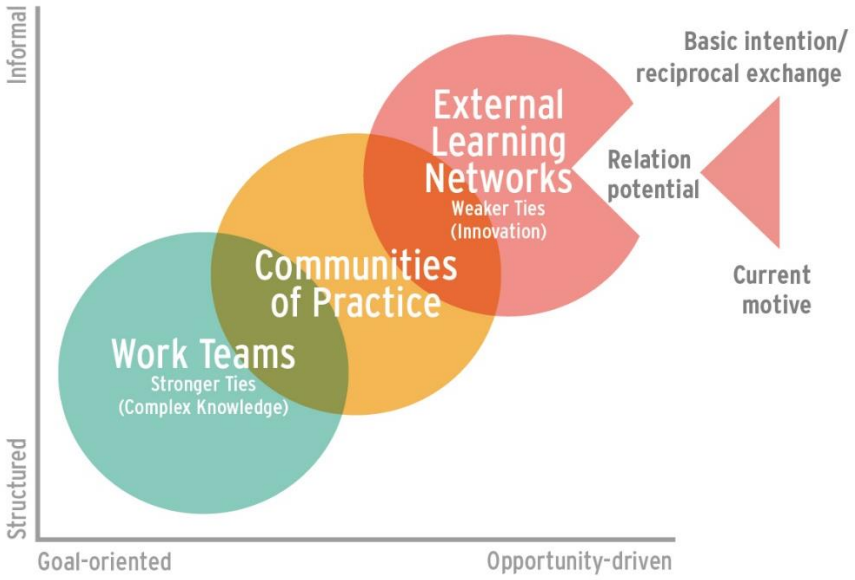

Figure 4: Functions of CoP – partly projects, partly network

What is more, for a network to function it needs a facilitator who takes the initiative, sends out invitations and information, motivates others to contribute and makes sure that network members stick to the basic principles of their network. Networks cannot start rolling or may fall asleep without this key player.

Systemic Case Clinic in Communities of Practice

Shop stewards are not systemic consultants. They are advocates of the workforce and in this function they are first and foremost are negotiation partners. If seen from a discourse ethics perspective, shop stewards can only hope that the better argument counts and that they thus are successful in the negotiation process. The traditional "case clinic" is based on this logic, too. The case bringer shares a case, the others listen and ask if anything is unclear. Then they discuss among each other how they would solve the problem and draw a conclusion. The knowledge and the experiences of the group are used in order to extend the range of possible solutions.

The effectiveness of this form of consultation can be increased by extending it by its systemic dimension. In that case it will be based on functional mechanisms that are similar to "staff work" of systemic consultants as explained above: Together they analyse the relevant stakeholders of the case, develop strategies and plan interventions on the basis of trial and error. This form of networking helps to tap into the collective potential of the network and each "intervention" that creates a desired impact on "the system" can be seen as co-determination.

A systemic case clinic can also make use of analogical problem solving[9], such as "systemic constellation". In a first step, the current situation of the case bringer – the person that constellates "the problem" is defined. In the next step, the problem is being tackled: representatives of the case are "moved around" in the room as long as they feel comfortable in their position. Many position changes may be necessary because each new position of a representative may change the relationship to the other representatives. A solution may be found once representatives in the room have positions that make both the case bringer and the representatives feel comfortable. As a third step, the results of the systemic constellation are translated into possible operative steps that the case bringer could implement. If necessary, further consultative sessions are held.

Here is an example of a systemic case clinic: An investigation into workload-related issues in the health and nursing sector that had revealed partly unbearable adverse effects on the health and well-being of staff was the theme of the systemic constellation. Several attempts by the works council to negotiate with the responsible politicians had failed, which is why the shop steward decided to go public. The Chamber of Labour and the Austrian Medical Chamber cooperated and organised a big event where the study was presented. The plan was to hand over a catalogue of demands to the responsible politician – the provincial governor. However, the politician simply did not attend the event and therefore the catalogue of demands could not be handed over to him. Employee representatives and medical doctors should not have the triumph of demonstrating the existing problem in public. Also later appointments with the provincial governor in charge did not take place – the meetings were delayed and postponed – the ball was frozen.

Enter the CoP of workplace health promotion. The systemic constellation was chosen as a method within the systemic case clinic. CoP members represented the various roles that were relevant in this specific case and took their positions to represent the case in the room. Representatives were re-positioned again and again around the person who represented the provincial governor, with the aim to find a "more suitable", i.e., more comfortable position. In vain. A solution could only be found by pushing the person who represented the provincial governor out of the room – this felt like a veritable liberation. The conclusion of the case bringer: It makes no sense to focus further on this very person, the provincial governor! In the next step other persons should be contacted and help solve the problem, probably as mediators that are open – and able – to communicate in both directions.

[9] Analogical intervention in systemic consulting refers to tools that use language but also non-verbal, artistic and creative means of expression such as metaphors, images, sculptures, sketches, pantomime, fairy tales, stories.

The Organisational Framework of Communities of Practice

As networks, CoP are in need of a basic intention, such as the need to exchange with others about a topical issue. And CoP need a trigger, such as an open space event with the slogan "What would I like to exchange about in my community of practice?" Certainly, the concept needs to be introduced beforehand, pointing out that a CoP only makes sense if members want to take action in their work environment. Once these two requirements – a basic intention and a trigger – are met, it only takes a small step towards building a community. When GEDIFO hosted an open space event, the following issues and fields of action were defined that should later form the domaines of the individual CoP:

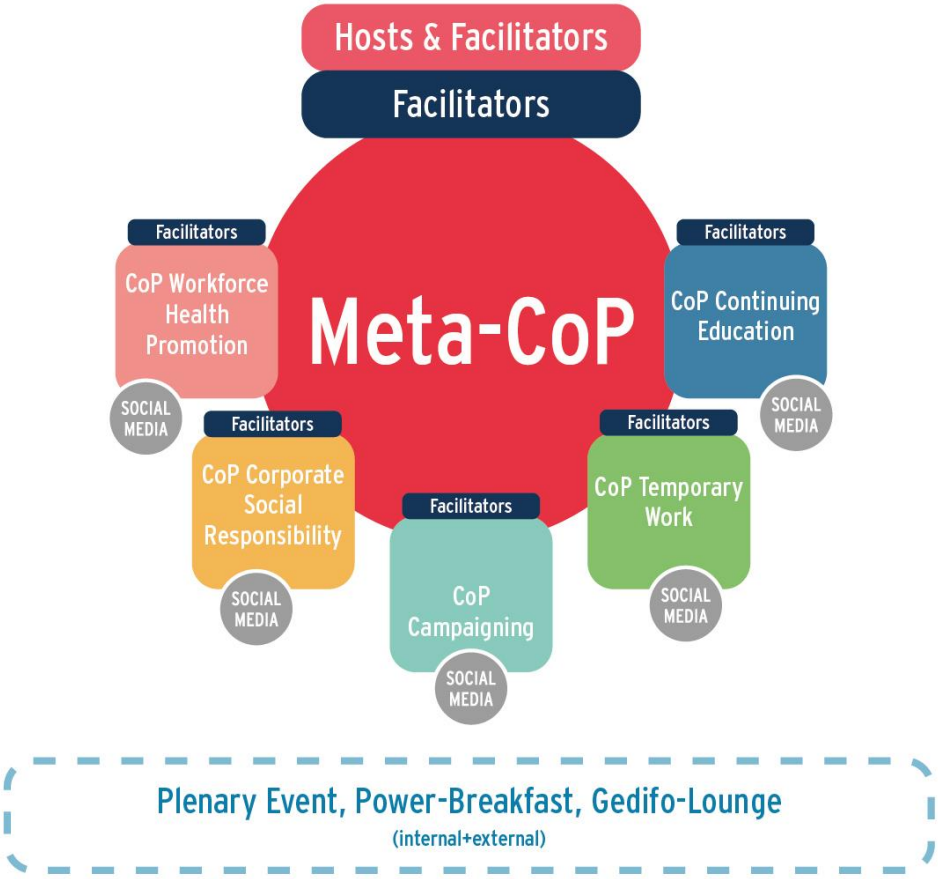

Figure 5: Trade union work of the future – the example of GEDIFO

1. *CoP Workforce Health Promotion*: There are already highly instruments that can help shop stewards to promote workforce health. However, shop stewards need to make use of these tools.
2. *CoP Corporate Social Responsibility*: CSR means the responsibility of organisations towards their stakeholders. Activities of organisations need to be reviewed as to whether they may cause damage to anyone, including adverse effects on employees.
3. *CoP Campaigning:* In negotiation situations with a strong power asymmetry a counter force is needed that can be established by means of internal and external public relations work.
4. *CoP Temporary Work*: temporary workers must not be discriminated against and be treated equally, like permanently employed staff. The legal requirements for equal treatment have been established with the implementation of the EU directive 2008/104/EG and its harmonisation with national law. However, these rules need to be implemented in practice.
5. *CoP Continuing Education*: Even though shop stewards have a legal right of consultation they rarely have to deal with issues of continuing education. They therefore need to make their voices heard more effectively in the first place.

These five CoP could exchange face to face and on a Moodle-based learning platform. What is more, a so called "Meta CoP" (Figure 5) was introduced that served as "steering group". The Meta CoP consisted of core members of the individual CoP and served as an exchange platform "across barriers" for the individual CoP and for the strategic development of GEDIFO. Every three months, big events were held, including open plenary events; target-specific power breakfasts; and GEDIFO lounge events. Last but not least a separate space for reflection was established where CoP host and moderator did the actual "staff work".

The whole organisational structure of GEDIO is similar to that of change management projects, with one important difference: the actual mile stones were fixed by the individual CoP and the Meta CoP and supported top down by the host and moderator. Nonetheless, the host who acts as sponsor and provides the budget and resources, will have certain expectations in terms of benefits.

The Role of Sponsor and Host

The Vienna Chamber of Labour took the role of host. GEDIFO was provided with a small budget, personnel and infrastructure. And even if this legitimises certain expectations towards the CoP, the host needs to be aware of the deal: CoP are continuously developing communities that do not follow a traditional management logic. Especially, CoP are not projects within which targets of the organisation are worked on but they live and blossom as a result of intrinsic motivation of their members who expect to solve their problems as a result of the exchange in CoP. This is why tasks cannot be forced upon CoP by external players.

Nonetheless the host can have an indirect influence on the development of a CoP. For organisational reasons, host and moderator need to prepare the CoP meetings – the CoP process is systemically reflected. And even if the agenda that results from these preparative meetings only serves as a suggestion for CoP members, every intervention is staged according to the motto "The one who sets the agenda, takes the lead!" However, the network postulate is true here, too: If members feel hijacked by external expectations, they will sooner or later stay away. This is why core members of a CoP should be included in the planning as much as possible. Accordingly, the host is well advised to only cautiously articulate his or her wishes. And yet he can expect a return on investment: on the one hand, innovation as a result of the melting of different perspectives and trying out new solutions on the basis of trial and error. On the other hand, going live with this innovation. The expertise that is continuously built in CoP is increasingly asked by management, which can lead to integrating the new solutions into the line structure. This transfer may not be free of friction because the development takes place outside the hierarchy and line management may feel "betrayed". In the worst case, innovative solutions are sabotaged.

Conclusion

The VUCA world presents enormous organisational challenges to employees' representatives. If business enterprises respond to this new complexity with *agile management*, it is up to trade unions and shop stewards to develop adequate instruments of co-determination. As "social entrepreneurs" shop stewards can act agile on behalf of employees. Systemic consulting provides them with the tools they need to create impact and act as entrepreneurs. Sharing and exchanging in communities of practice pools the resources of the many like-minded members and creates a collective intelligence. A creative power can unfold as a result of this applied subversion that could not be reached by means of traditional methods.

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