**From the periphery to the core: Understanding the process whereby members of a distributed community of practice become leaders of the community (and what the experience means to them)**

by

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## ABSTRACT

**Key Words:** Army profession; community of practice; core group; in-depth interviewing; informal organization; informal social system; knowledge management; leadership; meaning making; military profession; online communities; online facilitation; professional forum.

The core-group phenomenon in a distributed community of practice is the development of a small, socially connected and committed group of members that takes responsibility for the majority of activity in the system. The success of the larger community is contingent upon the vitality of the core group. Previous research has been limited largely to naming the phenomenon and establishing a relationship between the core group and the effectiveness of the community of practice. The purpose of this study was to come to a greater understanding of the core-group phenomenon by studying the lived experience of actual core-group members in one particular community of practice: a distributed community of company commanders in the U.S. Army. This research took an inductive, phenomenological approach and created insights based on multiple in-depth interviews of ten core-group members. The study explored the process whereby members of the core group traveled from the periphery of the community to the core and what their experiences mean to them. The process was found to be an iterative, mutually reinforcing process of participation and connection. A key finding was that core-group-members' experiences are meaningful in particular ways, and the meaningful nature of the experience reinforces their participation. Analysis yielded a definition for meaningful action in a community of practice, which builds on the work of Podolny, et al. (2005): An action, situated in the purposeful context of the community of practice, is meaningful to me when I make a tangible contribution to a valued other and/or the community (*to contribute*); I become more socially connected and achieve greater solidarity with other members (*to*

*connect*); and I become more personally effective (*to personally develop*). Finally, this research found that a definition for leadership in communities of practice should position leadership as a process whereby members foster the creation of meaning for each other. This study contributes to the growing field of communities of practice by providing an empirically grounded understanding of the core-group phenomenon.

## Introduction

Members of informal social systems exhibit varying degrees of participation in the system. A snapshot at one point in time, looking specifically at member participation, typically reveals a large number of people who are nominally active (or peripheral), and progressively smaller numbers of people who are more active and especially active. The smaller, especially active group within the system has been called the core group.

This pattern of a small, core-group taking responsibility for the majority of activity within the system has been observed in many types of informal social systems to include geographic communities, online networks, and distributed communities of practice. For example, Keller, in a 30-year longitudinal study of a New Jersey urban community, found that a "fraction of the residents"—a "nucleus of concerned leaders"—was responsible for the majority of activity and played a "crucial role" in the community (2003, 211). Wasko and Teigland (2002) found that a small, "critical mass" of individuals—4% of the community—sustained knowledge exchange within one particular online network. Two separate studies of open-source-software-development communities report that a small core team creates the vast majority of new knowledge. For example, a core team of fifteen Apache developers contributed more than 88% of added lines and 91% of deleted lines of code (Mockus, Fielding, and Herbsleb 2002); and 50% of responses on an Apache Usenet were provided by "the 100 most prolific [knowledge] providers (2% of all providers)" (Lakhani and Hippel 2003). Finally, community leaders at Buckman Laboratories estimated that 10-20% of community members respond to questions and sustain knowledge sharing in the community (Dixon 2000). See also Bruckman (2004) and Kling & Courtright (2004).

Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder provide a visual representation of this participation pattern (Figure 1) and describe the core group as one of three main levels of participation in a community of practice (emphasis added):

> The first [of three levels of participation] is a small core group of people who actively participate in discussions, even debates, in the public community forum. They often take on community projects, identify topics for the community to address, and move the community along its learning agenda. **This group is the heart of the community.** As the community matures, this core group takes on much of the community's leadership, its members becoming auxiliaries to the community coordinator. But this group is usually rather small, only 10 to 15 percent of the whole community (2002, 56).

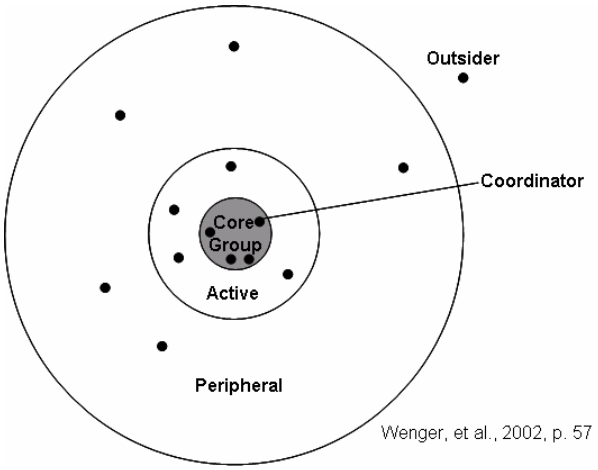


**Figure 1: Participation in a Community of Practice**

Research has established that the core group is critical to the success of communities of practice. For example, Snyder and Briggs state that "Leadership by an effective community coordinator and core group is essential" (2003, 9), and McDermott found "building a core group" to be a critical success factor in successful communities of practice (2000).

**Discussion of Key Terms and Army-specific Context**

First, drawing upon the work of Katz and Kahn, I conceive of a **social system** as "the patterned activities of a number of individuals. Moreover, these patterned activities are complementary or interdependent with respect to some common output or outcome; they are repeated [and] relatively enduring… (1966, 17). Social systems are open systems, which is to emphasize their interdependence with the environment in which they are situated. I use the word **informal** as Weick defines it: "The interaction patterns that develop in addition to those that are prescribed by lines of authority" (1979, 17). Informal social systems are characterized by voluntary human interactions and relationships and are emergent rather than hierarchically driven. **Communities of practice** are one type of informal social system. They are "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002). The term "distributed" is added to community of practice in this study to

specify a geographically distributed community of practice whose members connect in various ways. See Wenger, McDermott, Snyder (2002, 249): "'Distributed' is the preferred term over 'virtual' or 'online' because, as is the case for 'distance education' initiatives, these communities generally connect in many ways—including face-to-face—although they may rely primarily on 'virtual' communications."

**What is a company commander?** A company (also battery, troop, detachment) is an organizational unit in the U.S. Army comprised of approximately 100 soldiers. A captain with anywhere from five to eight years of service in the Army leads this organization for an average of eighteen months as the company commander. This is the first level of leadership granted full command authority, to include the authority to administer the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). Due to the nature of the current operating environment—complex and rapidly evolving—power and responsibility is being increasingly delegated to the company level. The decentralized nature of modern warfare, combined with a significant increase in technological capabilities, has resulted in company commanders having more responsibility and power than ever before.

**What is the Company Command Professional Forum (the CC forum)?** This is a distributed community of practice in the U.S. Army focused on the practice of company command. Membership and domain are continually negotiated, but have tended to make the current company commander and the practical requirements of leading a company the central focus. The stated purpose of the CC forum is: To improve the effectiveness of company commanders, and to advance the practice of company command. The term professional forum is introduced by Dixon, et al. (2005) to clarify the "profession" as a defining aspect of this type of community of practice. The term *professional forum* is used interchangeably with *community of practice* throughout this article.

**Who Are Topic Leads?** These are Army officers who volunteer to undertake informal leadership roles in the CC forum. In other communities of practice, topic leads are typically called informal community leaders, editors, facilitators, or topic coordinators. The term *topic lead* has been defined this way:

> These are CC members who take responsibility for particular topic areas within CompanyCommand.army.mil. They manage and facilitate the main topics of the forum—leadership, warfighting, training, fitness, force protection, maintenance, supply, and Soldiers & families. Other topic leads provide leadership to "Rally Points," which are forums within CC that serve specific types of company commanders—for example, ADA [air defense artillery], EOD [explosive ordnance detachment], and HQ [headquarters]. Still other topic leads coordinate special topic areas such as professional reading (Dixon et al. 2005, 4).

## Research Methodology

In order to understand a group, it can be helpful to study the experience of the people who are the group—the people who carry out the practices, processes, and policies of the group. The purpose of this study was to come to a greater understanding of the core-group phenomenon by studying the lived experience of core-group members in one particular community of practice: a distributed community of company commanders in the U.S. Army. This research took an inductive, phenomenological approach and created insights based on in-depth interviews of the core-group members. The study was shaped by two guiding questions:

1. What is the process whereby members journey from the periphery to the core?
2. What does it mean to the members to be part of the core group?

This research placed the lived experience of core-group members front and center, and insights were induced from that lived experience. Research was conducted using a qualitative, in-depth interview method based largely on the work of Seidman (1998) that calls for three, ninety-minute interviews with each participant: an initial interview focused on establishing rapport and exploring the participants' life history and values; a second interview focused specifically on the participants' experience as core-group members; and a third interview that encouraged the participants to reflect upon the meaning they make of their experience as core-group members. Interviewing core-group members gave me access to the context of their behavior and allowed me to gain understanding into the meaning of their active participation.

**Participant Selection and Description**

Participants were selected "purposefully," meaning I intentionally selected members of the CC core group (Creswell 2003, 185). I identified approximately fifty potential core-group members based on their demonstrated participation and then, using the principle of "sufficiency," I sought to maximize variance and ensure I interviewed members that reflected the range of participants in the core-group population (Seidman 1998; Weiss 1994). I paid close attention to these factors: amount of time in the core group (I wanted to include core-group members representing a range of time spent as members of the core group); basic branches or specialty fields (I wanted to include participants that represented a range of different branches in the Army); current status as a company commander (I wanted to include participants who were still in company command jobs, as well as participants who were no longer in command); and experience commanding in combat (to reflect the overwhelming number of company commanders currently in combat or preparing for combat).

The principle of theoretical saturation further helped me judge how many participants to interview. Glaser and Strauss (1967) use this idea to describe when additional interviews (or data gathering) no longer add new ideas. Weiss writes: "You stop when you encounter diminishing returns, when the information you obtain is redundant or peripheral, when what you do learn that is new adds little to what you already know to justify the time and cost of the interviewing" (1994, 21). This is supported by Seidman, who puts it succinctly: "If you stop learning, you've reached the point of saturation" (conversation with Burgess June 5, 2004). I sensed that I was at or close to saturation after closing out the three interviews with the eighth participant. I continued with two more participants to ensure the principle of saturation was met.

In the end, I selected ten participants and interviewed each of them three times. All ten participants are active-duty U.S. Army officers who are either currently serving in the job of company commander or previously were company commanders. The prototypical participant is a thirty-something, well-educated, married male Army captain with seven to ten years of military service, which includes significant experience commanding a company in combat. He used the CC forum in preparation for and during

company command and either became part of the core group while in command or soon after coming out of command.

Interviews were primarily conducted via telephone due to the geographic distribution of the core group. Interviews were recorded using a digital recorder, and the recordings were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. After checking transcripts for accuracy by listening to the recording while reading the transcript, I uploaded all three transcripts for a participant into Atlas.ti, which is the software package I used to help manage the material. I reviewed any hand-written notes taken during the actual interviews and then began coding the transcripts. The initial process used could be called line-by-line, open coding, which is to say that I created and assigned labels to the text as I read through the transcripts (Charmaz 2001; Coffey and Atkinson 1996). I then worked with the data, looking for and writing about overall patterns and themes. This was an iterative process of analyzing, writing, and reflecting.

## Discussion

**Research Question 1: What is the process whereby members of a community of practice journey from the periphery to the core?**

The first research question focused on understanding the process whereby members of a community of practice become more actively involved—how they move from being members on the periphery to being leaders that are essential to the success of the community. During the second interview in the three-interview series, I asked participants to describe their experiences with CC chronologically, beginning with first finding out about it and continuing all the way through to the present. This story was interwoven with the story of being in the Army, so it is helpful to begin with establishing the basic pattern for the participants' careers:

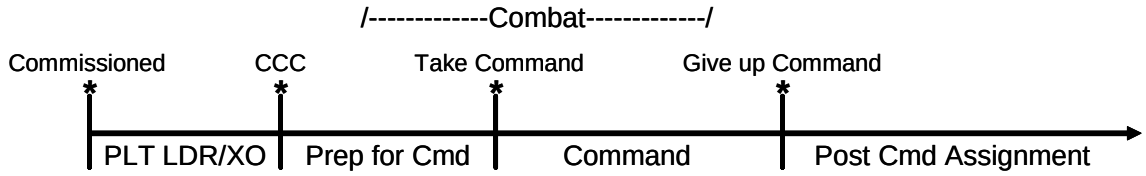


**Figure 2: Typical officer career pattern**

The prototypical participant is commissioned as an officer in the Army and attends basic officer training. After an initial assignment as a platoon leader (PLT LDR) and company executive officer (XO), the newly promoted captain attends the five-month captain's career course (CCC), and then transitions to a new location where he undergoes some period of time working on staff and preparing for company command. At some point, he or she takes command of a company, commands, and then gives up command. The period of command time is typically eighteen months to two years; some officers—like five of the ten participants in this study—are selected to command a second company and therefore go through two iterations of prepare, command, give up command. In the current world situation, almost every officer experiences a combat deployment, and often more than one. After command, officers—like seven of the participants at the time of these interviews—transition into post-command assignments such as graduate school, instructing at the captain's career course, serving on higher-level staff assignments, or teaching at West Point.

In the process of studying the interview transcripts, I began to refer to these stories (the stories of the participants' relationship with and activity in the community of practice) as becoming-core-group-member stories, or simply, *becoming* stories. After studying the participants' *becoming* stories, an underlying structure began to emerge—a structure that describes the *becoming* process. Combining this structure with the career pattern previously described (Figure 3), provides an indication of the general pattern of moving from the periphery to the center:

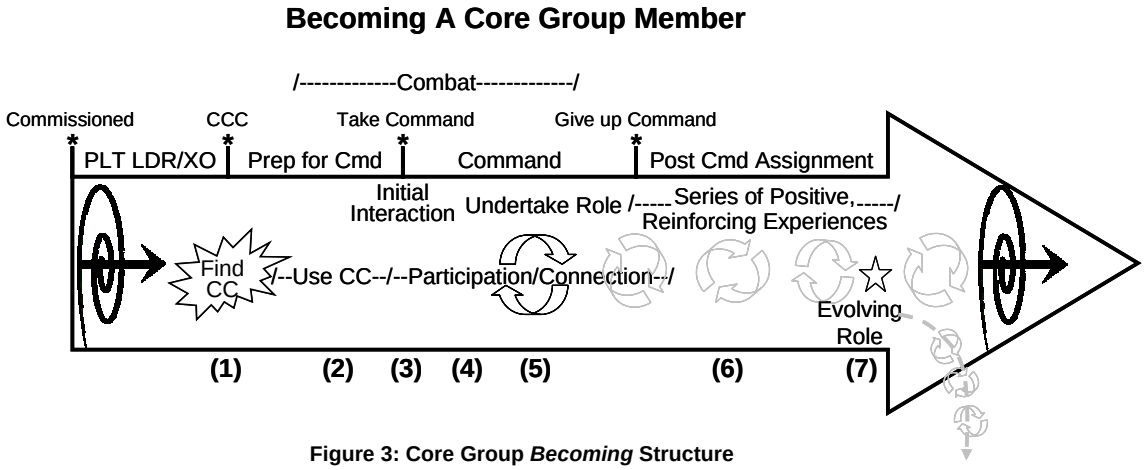


**Figure 3: Core Group *Becoming* Structure**

The basic storyline is that the participant (1) finds CC either while attending or close to the time he or she is attending the captain's career course. The participant (2) uses CC to help him or her prepare for command and continues to use it while in command. At some point, there occurs (3) an initial interaction between the participant and member(s) of the core group. Over time, there is (4) a pattern of increasing participation in the forum and increasing interaction (or connection) with core-group members, leading to (5) an invitation to take on a leadership role with CC. Undertaking a role is followed by an iterative process of increasing participation and connection, which can be described as (6) a series of meaningful experiences that have a cumulative, positive effect. At some point, often in conjunction with increasing time and distance from his or her command experience, the person's role begins (7) to evolve—either towards greater leadership and support roles, or towards a gradual disengagement from the core group. Of note, becoming a core-group member is not something that you ever fully arrive at; you are always becoming, never arriving.

A second image of the prototypical *becoming* story takes a cross-section view of Figure 3, following the key events in a prototypical core-group-member's *becoming* story over time.

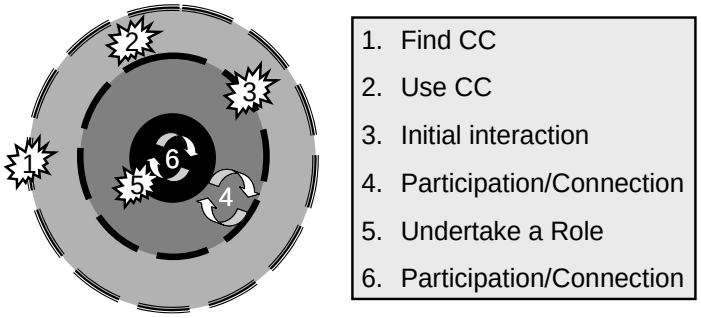


**Figure 4: Cross-Section View of Core-group *Becoming* Structure**

Moreover, this *becoming* story fits into the larger story of becoming a member of the Army profession, a career-long process. One way to think about both of these stories is in terms of identity and commitment. Over time, identity evolves and officers become more committed members of the profession. Disengagement from the CC core group may not change the person's trajectory towards becoming a member of the profession and, in fact, it may be a positive step in that longer-term story as the person becomes more active in the professional forum at the next level of leadership.

For the purposes of this article, I will limit discussion to the most important theme when it comes to understanding the core-group phenomenon: the iterative and mutually reinforcing process of participation and connection, which can be further broken down into four sub-themes: (1) use of and gaining value from CC, (2) undertaking a leadership role, (3) series of positive (and reinforcing) experiences, and (4) evolving role.

**Participation and Connection**

ALAN provides an exceptional introduction to this theme:

> I was getting ready to come home for a couple of months before going back in for a second tour in Iraq. I had command under control, I knew what I was doing, we had kicked ass and we are now in for the long haul. The first sergeant and I were clicking, the FRG [family readiness group] was clicking, I had all my guys below me clicking—everything was good. [And] now I actually had things to say that were relevant. I went out of take, take, take, take, take to take/give, take/give, take/give, take/give.
>
> And there was also something else that happened right around then, and it just sort of happened. People started contacting me on email outside of the site. For the most part up to that point all the action associated with the site I had seen in postings, in files that were being put up, in products that people could use, and in the comments that people were putting up there. But somewhere around that time, I started doing business offline with people and that made it more personal. You start thinking about, okay, these aren't just random people out there. You now see the pattern where all these guys are showing up and…they go from being just names on a screen to people that you associate things with.

At some point, typically during or shortly after company command—and less often, before taking command—the participants transitioned from strictly reading and using content to contributing in some way. Although I could argue that simply reading content and even the act of joining and entering the online space is a form of participation, I am using the term here to specifically refer to observable acts of participation; for example, posting a question, or engaging in an online discussion, or completing the web-based combat-leader interview. Participation, thus, makes a member visible to the community, and it is that visibility that creates the awareness in the minds of the core group to communicate or to connect with the member. This initial connection typically includes a warm welcoming, acknowledgement and appreciation of participation, and—sometimes—a gift or token of appreciation such as a CC coin, book, or hat. ALAN, for example, spoke endearingly about the broken-handled CC coffee mug he received while in Germany, which he referred to as an “unsolicited attaboy.”

I use the word connection in the sense of an invisible thread between two people. Sometimes the very act of participation creates a connection between two people, such as when a person responds to another's question in a discussion, or when a person emails or otherwise communicates with another person. When multiple iterations of connection-making activity occur between two people, the thread grows thicker and a human relationship develops. Of note, not all connection-making activities are equal in impact. For example, a face-to-face, personal, one-on-one conversation is more powerful than two members becoming aware of each other in a casual threaded discussion.

What is evident in the participants' *becoming* stories is that participation and connection are co-creative. Participation creates connection, which creates participation. It is often a mutually reinforcing process that can propel the person to a more central position in the community of practice. For example, MARTIN—a current company commander in Iraq at the time—became involved in a threaded discussion about air-to-ground coordination which led to him being emailed by core-group members:

> One of the guys wrote me and said, "Hey, saw your post—it's good stuff; we're glad to have you; welcome aboard; we think you're gonna enjoy the website, etc., etc." And then I wrote him back and said, "Well, thanks for such a warm welcome," you know, and we started a little conversation about who I was and what the website was about, and then they just came right out and said…"Hey, we're looking for somebody to run the Aviation site. Are you interested?" And I allowed as how I wasn't sure how much time I could dedicate to it being as how we were deployed, but, yes, I was definitely interested in doing it, and it kind of grew from there.

Similar conversations began after ROY, JOHN, and CHRIS each began participating in online discussions and contributing content. ROY had used CC as a resource during his two-year company command; however, it wasn't until he shared some of his knowledge and core-group members corresponded with him that we would say that human connections had formed.

Interestingly, participation does not always initiate this cycle. In some cases, a connection is a catalyst for the initial act of participation. RANDY had matter-of-factly used CC content to help him prepare for command, but he had never participated in the sense we are using the term here. While in Iraq he met PAUL, a CC core-group member. PAUL interviewed RANDY—putting a face to the CC name—and he explained to RANDY how he could share his valuable knowledge with leaders preparing for Iraq. This face-to-face connection was a catalyst for RANDY's first overt act of participation:

> I'll be honest with you, I didn't really pay much attention to [CC] after I took command until PAUL—I ran into PAUL in Mosul—and he was doing his interviews… He was talking to me about it and I [agreed to be interviewed] and then he told me, "Maybe you ought to go on [CC] and share some of these things that you've told me." …[Then] I remember answering those [combat-leader interview] questions. I think I remember going back in CC like two or three times and editing, you know, changing up my answers as things were becoming clearer. And after that I thought, you know what, this is probably a good way because there's a lot of guys coming over and then you start reading some of the questions and guys are [asking questions I can answer]… At that point I was like, you know what, maybe I ought to start throwing some of this stuff up there because really how else are they gonna get some of the information because the Army does a good job at pre-producing stuff, it's just very slow in lessons learned and things like that. So // and that's // at that point I thought, well, you know, there's a lot of utility here and that's when I started getting very involved, I guess you could say.

And in some cases, a previous relationship (thick connection) exists between a person and a core-group member first. For example, MATT was good friends with MITCH and had a pre-existing relationship with NICK. Based on those connections, TOMMY invited him to help facilitate a leader-development seminar for captains who were preparing for command. Over the course of six months, MATT and TOMMY were involved in multiple connection-making activities, to include three iterations of the leader-development seminar, ultimately leading to MATT becoming an active leader in the online forum. And, in DALE's case, his act of joining CC gave core-group member JAMES—who he had previously served with—the opportunity to warmly welcome him. In that case, there was a pre-existing connection and DALE's entering the online forum created the chance for that connection to be updated.

One interesting activity in CC that serves as a mechanism to foster this participation and connection cycle is the featuring of members on the main page of the forum. The core group collaboratively identifies an experienced company commander who has begun to emerge as an active participant, and then invites that person to be the CC featured member. A conversation ensues during which the member to-be-featured provides a photograph, talks about his or her experiences and current situation, and participates in a short email interview (which becomes part of the featured-member package). Interestingly, six of the ten participants in this study were featured members. CHRIS talks about that experience:

> I really like the website and I like contributing and I think it was an exchange of emails between TOMMY and I [that prompted my becoming a "Featured Member."] We had emailed a couple of more times, and I had posted some more [discussion posts in the forum] and—I don't know if it

> was [the things I had contributed] or maybe my blossoming personality, [but] from there it was just, "Hey CHRIS would you mind," you know, "If you can send us a picture and then if you can answer these questions for us." I was hesitant at first but heck, I'd gotten a lot from the website so why not, you know, and that's the way it came about. It was a long process…

In this process, a thicker connection is established between CHRIS and the core group. Moreover, this activity intensifies CHRIS' visibility in the community and serves, in some way, as a public announcement of his commitment to CC and the profession. CHRIS goes on to say,

> [A friend] made fun of me at first when…my mug [picture] went up on the web page but, you know, after that he started using the web page and whatnot. Oh [he] definitely [gave me a hard time about being the featured member], yeah, because the picture was so cheesy… I didn't know how big of a deal it was gonna be until I had some of my old roommates from Fort Bragg being like, "cheese dick," [laughs]—just hassling me. I didn't care because you know what happened? People started writing me for information, and I felt as though I was giving back to the Army community that has given me so much. So it was good; it was awesome, the good month that I was up there, however long, a month and a half I guess it was. [laughs] And, you know, I got emails two or three times a week—guys I went to [ROTC] Advanced Camp with nine years ago would be like "Hey, man, I saw you up on CompanyCommand.com." And I was like, wow, okay, what's up man, and started writing back and forth. And guys I went to the captain's career course with that I lost touch… There were just so many people that came out of the woodwork, like, "CHRIS, I saw you." …People keeping in touch—great… And that's cool…

Thus, the activity of being the featured member sparks a whole new cycle of participation and connection for CHRIS. It is an important part of his *becoming* story.

**(1) Using and Benefiting From Participating in the CC Forum**

Most of the participants used CC during their time in command, such that they had a clear sense of the value they gained by being involved. For example, solving problems, getting ideas and tools, and generally integrating CC into their work as company commanders—to include as a tool to develop their subordinate leaders. Becoming a core-group member is, most importantly, a result of members engaging deeply in the forum, and—as RANDY described—when you are given a leadership role in the forum, "you keep contributing in the way you've always contributed." In the process of gaining value from participating, the participants began to perceive the forum as integral to their effectiveness. "I valued the forum because I personally experienced what being involved can do for you" was a sentiment that echoed across many of the interviews. Core-group members do not have to make a case for the value of CC to

active members because the members have personally experienced that value. In addition to the sense of value for the forum that develops when members personally benefit from participating, they often feel a responsibility to reciprocate—to give back. TERRY makes the point well:

> A basic underlying assumption I operate on is that you don't just take… That's a basic value that I have: always try and give back to the folks who give to you… If anybody contributes to your development or anybody helps you out in some way you help them back.

And JOHN says, "When I have a question or need some information, this is one of the resources I look to. So, I feel that it's my obligation to post any information I have…" Thus, gaining personal benefit invokes a level of reciprocity that would not exist if the member had not personally benefited from being a member. This sense of value for the forum, as well as the desire to reciprocate, sets the conditions for the member to respond positively when core-group members connect with the member.

**(2) Undertaking a Leadership Role**

At some point in the iterative cycle of participation and connection, the participants in this study were invited to take greater responsibility in an area that matched up with their already existing passion and talent. In order to know what a person's talents are and what they are passionate about, you must know that person. In the previous excerpt from MARTIN, he describes a back-and-forth process with core-group members, which—among other things—allows the core-group members to get to know him. MARTIN became involved in a threaded discussion and then a core-group member warmly welcomed him and let him know his participation was noticed and valuable. "And then I wrote him back and said, 'Well, thanks for such a warm welcome,' you know, and we started kind of a little conversation about who I was and what the website was about." The core group discovered that MARTIN has significant experience with and passion for aviation and especially air-to-ground coordination. It was a natural fit to invite MARTIN to take lead in this subject matter. His increased responsibility in CC became a natural extension of who he already is.

The underlying assumption driving this CC core-group behavior is that company commanders who become active members have experience with and passion for an aspect (or aspects) of company command. It is therefore the CC goal to discover the person's talent/passion first, and then to give them a platform to more fully be themselves—and to more fully bring themselves to the community. ROY provides an especially valuable insight into how this can occur:

> And it was at that point that TOMMY contacted me and sent me an email saying, "Hey, I saw your post, I looked at your dog tags [member profile]. I really think you are somebody that we would benefit from having on our team. Are you in a position to contribute to the profession?"… And so TOMMY and I had a phone conversation; we talked about different places to contribute, different ways to contribute… [We] finally settled that I would jump into the *Soldiers and Families* [topic]… I felt strongly about the topic because in my experience it was something that really mattered to soldiers and it was one of those intangibles that really made a difference in how prepared your soldiers were and how prepared they felt… *Soldiers and Families* was a place where I felt that I could advance the level of knowledge and the level of discussion that was present and it was an area where I felt that I could really make a difference…

During the course of this research, I found that core-group members do not limit their participation to one topic; however, it seems that giving them a leadership role in a topic that they especially like and have experience with serves as an invitation for them to take additional responsibility, and it grants them permission to take more initiative and to become stewards of the community. This was the case, for example, with SHAWN and *Professional Reading* and JOHN and his passion and expertise in the area of *Physical Fitness*.

This leads us to a key point, which is that having a role is a key step in the *becoming* stories. With that role come additional editing privileges as well as access to a "team only" part of the forum, which is essentially an online community within the community, for core-group members. Most importantly, members' identity within the forum evolves with the taking on of a role: participation in the forum takes on new meaning. JOHN provides us with an absolutely fascinating case study of this because he was invited to be the co-topic lead of the *Fitness* topic after my first interview with him, but before the last interview. Here, before he has undertaken a role in the CC forum, he talks about his commitment to have an exceptional web page for the company he commands:

> When you're given a responsibility, it carries over… // Right now I have a company web page. It's not like CompanyCommand website—where ok, I really don't have to do anything. I can just

> go on there and get stuff, but [pause] on the company website I have a responsibility to update it not because I have to // … If I've taken on this thing I'm gonna do it and it's gonna be right. You know? ...

And with regards to his role with CC, he says: "I'm just one of many who have possibly something good that they can contribute… I don't run that fitness page or really control anything on there… I don't have an unrealistic vision of what my role is there." By the final interview, after having accepted MICHAEL's invitation to help him lead the *Fitness* topic, we see that JOHN's perspective has evolved:

> [As far as the experiences with CC that stand out to me?] Well, just finding the page was a pretty neat experience for one. [And] all this recently has been pretty interesting, with you coming in [the research interviews], and the whole Fitness thing—this is definitely a turning point or a // maybe not a turning point but one of the milestones if you will that I'll remember or look back on through time… This has definitely given me a different perspective and almost // well a responsibility and more ownership now in what's going on. So it's more personal now.

Finally, ROY reflects on how the invitation to a leadership role influenced the nature of his participation:

> [Without having a role], I think I would have been active but I would not have taken any type of leadership or organizational role because I simply would not have felt the confidence to do that. I would have felt like it was not my role. All of us want to take initiative and all of us want to be out front leading, but if you don't feel like you have the authority to do that // authority and responsibility are a pair and you can't have one without the other. And so I certainly felt like I had a responsibility to do it, but without that conversation, without that outreach from another team member and that empowering of, "We want you to take this part of it," I would not have felt that I had the authority to do the kinds of things like reaching out to team members and saying, "Hey, we want you on board, we think you're a great person"—and doing all of those things. So, yeah, I don't think I would have been anywhere near as involved… I would not have been anywhere near as engaged in CompanyCommand as I have been over the last two years.

Thus, we see that having a leadership role—and especially one that is aligned with the member's talents and expertise—plays an important role in the *becoming* process.

**(3) Iterative Process of Increasing Participation and Connection**

In the *becoming* stories, what occurs next is an iterative process of increasing participation and connection. Of critical importance, the *becoming* story does not end with taking on a leadership role; it is more appropriate to think of that event as an initial commitment that develops depth and meaning as the core-group member experiences being a core-group member, and as he continues to participate and connect with the people who are the CC forum. It is also important to observe that the participants

experienced a series of meaningful experiences—one after the other—that had a cumulative, positive effect. I draw attention to this by including "series of positive (and reinforcing) experiences" in the *becoming* structure diagram. If the initial interaction and participation/connection cycle is the key to growing a core group, it is the series of positive (and reinforcing) experiences that is key to sustaining the core group.

Each of the participants experienced this series of positive (and reinforcing) experiences, though each is at a different location along their journey. For example, between September 2003 and May 2004, ROY took on responsibility for leading the *Soldiers & Families* topic, connected with MATT who was attending the same graduate school, received tangible evidence of his having an impact on a member seeking input on casualty operations, attended an On Fire Rendezvous (meeting of the core group) in Washington D.C., reorganized the *Soldiers & Families* topic, began developing relationships with members, and represented the forum/presented his experience with the forum at the Navy knowledge management conference in San Diego. These are the concrete experiences ROY talks about when asked to describe his experience as a core-group member. When we look at his reflections about these experiences, we begin to get a sense for their impact on his overall experience as a core-group member:

- **Volunteering to be a leader in the forum:** "And I think there was a real conscious shift in my mind of, yeah, this is something different."

- **Contributing to a member in need (in Iraq):** "It was really a great thing for her, and it was a great thing for me to have that validation of my actions. And, again, going back to this idea of I'm looking for ways to reconnect with the profession and contribute to an Army at war, well this was it. You know, this was me giving some kind of tangible assistance, to people directly involved in the fight. And so it was a tremendous boost for my dealings with that."

- **Face-to-face meeting with the core group:** "That was huge because that brought together such a group of like-minded professionals, and staying with that group of people for three or four days, talking with them, generating ideas, was a huge energy boost. It really just kind of got me reenergized and back into the thick of it. It gave me some huge ideas on reorganizing the taxonomy of how *Soldiers and Families* was organized and trying to make it more content friendly and trying to make it more user-friendly. And it really just kind of reaffirmed what I thought I was doing with CompanyCommand and why it was valuable to me and why it was valuable to the profession. So that was a huge boost…"

- **Presentation at Navy conference:** "The advantage of going down and talking about something and briefing something is that it forces you to kind of reorganize in your own head—just like

teaching makes you better about a subject [pause] because when you have to teach something or you have to talk about it you really have to get it straight in your head. By the same token, doing this briefing really got it straight in my head about what it is that I think I'm doing here; so doing that briefing was not only a great outreach to another group of military professionals—which is always worthwhile—but for me personally it really helped me sort it out in my head what am I doing here, what the purpose of this is."

- **Developing relationships with members.** "I would see a note about something on the website that was a request for assistance and I'd post something to try and help out or I'd send a note to somebody to say thanks. That would generate follow-on request for content or follow-on request for this or that [and] helped draw people in, helped them contribute more and also helped kind of reinforce my sense of belonging and my sense of value in working with this site."

What stands out in ROY's story is that each of the experiences is important to him, and they build on each other. When he reflects on the January 2004 face-to-face meeting in D.C., he says, "It really just kind of got me reenergized and back into the thick of it." He implies that he was in need of being reenergized; i.e., his energy was waning. And the things ROY learned at the meeting motivated and equipped him to reorganize his topic in the online space. Moreover, the San Diego conference in May caused him to really think through the purpose of the whole thing and what he was doing with it. In the interview, he explained that the experience of personally making a difference for the member in Iraq gave him the confidence to speak at the conference; whereas without that personal sense that he was a true contributor, he may not have felt like he was the right person to present at the conference. Thus, he underwent a series of positive experiences that built on each other and made an important impact on his *becoming*.

These types of memorable experiences occurred for all the participants. Other examples include RANDY traveling to Germany to help facilitate a leader-development seminar, DALE and SHAWN taking advantage of the professional reading challenge—which included CC sending them copies of a book of their choosing to read with their lieutenants, and MATT developing and launching a completely new topic to honor members who are killed in combat. Perhaps the rendezvous—which ROY described above—is the experience that made the most impact on the participants. Because the impact comes across so strong in the interviews, I will share a few more comments from the participants about it here:

**DALE:** "The On Fire Rendezvous [in Colorado] absolutely without a doubt was critical [to my becoming more involved]… That was another one of those experiences that was just incredible… And it's hard to put into words how that On Fire thing really kind of kept me hooked because had I not gone to that I'm not sure I would be // I would have continued to post, but I'm not sure I

would have been as involved as I am. I probably would have looked at JAMES and told him he's nuts if he wants me to come on as a co-topic lead for Headquarters Commander Rally Point… And there's a cool factor involved with this… It's just a cool thing to be a part of."

**TERRY:** "[The On-Fire Rendezvous] for me personally it gave me some new ways to look at how to build conversations… It changed my perspective… The other great thing that came out of it was meeting people like ROY, meeting JAMES and GARY, and a lot of the others that were just a name and an occasional conversation on the site—MATT and all the other folks…and being able to network with them because being able to put a face with the name…I was less intimidated to ask a question… Surrounded by so many awesome people, for me personally, I was just like, wow…what a great bunch as far as having a support system, bouncing ideas off: "Hey, what do you think about this? What do you think about that," and broadening out // whatever I was weak in or didn't know about or didn't have an experience in, I knew I had a great group of friends that I could rely on to make up for that shortfall and who I could also learn a lot from."

**MATT:** "The turning point for me is when we went to DC [for the first rendezvous]"

**RANDY:** "Being invited out to the [rendezvous] meant a lot to me… I was blown away by it. It was so awesome."

**ALAN:** "It was fantastic to get the rest of the story about what was going on with the site, and to be able to talk about where it's going… I actually got to see a lot of people and see mirrors of myself because the folks that were there all had that same stupid smirk on their face of, you know, what we're doing is the absolute coolest thing on the entire planet. It's so cool that, really, if you expose anybody to it they're gonna agree that, damn, this is pretty cool… So it was good because that built upon the whole idea that it's not just the site, it's the people; it's just not what's posted on there, it's the means by which you can get things done… I got to know that there are a lot of other people out there who are bit by the bug—who have the same crazy devotion to the movement of CompanyCommand."

In summary, the participants experienced a series of positive (and reinforcing) experiences that happened in succession over time. Moreover, the experiences have a cumulative impact.

**(4) Evolving Role**

As time passes and core-group members become more experienced and more senior as far as their time away from their company commander experience, their role within the forum often evolves. While still in command and during the time immediately following command, core-group members are in an ideal situation to contribute. They are at the cutting-edge of knowledge in the company command domain. On the other hand, they often have limited time available and may not yet be equipped with the skills that go with the other roles (e.g., facilitator and steward). After they come out of command, they

might have more time available and they continue to gain experience that allows them to be more effective core-group members. However, at the same time that they are gaining skill and experience as core-group members, they are also getting farther away from personal experience as company commanders. Given the rapidly changing environment, it doesn't take long for past company commanders to perceive themselves to be less relevant to the community, and this perception increases the longer they are out of command. One experienced participant said, "With each passing day, my opinion of myself is I'm less relevant." A second participant, not yet even out of command, said:

> Since I've now been back from Iraq for a year and my major's board has already convened, I probably ought to start looking to see if I can find another young commander who would like to get in there and post a lot of the new TTPs [tactics, techniques, & procedures] and kind of take over the stuff because I'll be leaving command here. I'm not really sure I'll be relevant more than about maybe two years after command…

A third participant reinforces this perception of losing relevance with each passing day away from the company command job:

> You go outside your relevance window. And I'm quickly getting there in terms of HHC specific stuff simply because I look now at the way an HHC commander // it's been a little over eighteen months since I've been back from Iraq. I don't know what tank company commanders are doing there so much anymore and I'm not exactly sure how HHC guys are being utilized there.

And a fourth participant said:

> That's where I see my role has changed… It's interesting that some of us who have been around [CC] for a couple of years now and // …I don't wanna say we've moved on because we haven't; I think we still have something to contribute, but it's not in the same way we did when we were commanders… I'm not sure how to articulate it.

Thus core-group members often perceive that they are becoming less relevant to the specific knowledge domain of the community over time.

Being promoted to major is another factor that, for some participants, has reinforced this shift in identity. Within CC, there is a strong—and intentional—focus on the current company commander as far as the identity of the forum. The forum is called CompanyCommand and the symbol greeting members is a pair of captain bars (rank insignia). Everything in the forum clarifies that this is a place for company commanders, who are captains in the U.S. Army. So, as one participant who had been a major for a couple years by the time of the interviews put it, "If you pull up the website, one of the first things you

bump into on the homepage is the captain's bars, which is the way it should be, but I don't have captain's bars [pause] Where does a major's oak leaf fit into that captain bar picture?" Given the clear message that the forum sends members, this core-group member is asking, "How do I fit into this picture?"

One option for core-group members is to transition from being especially active contributors of their personal knowledge about commanding a company to being exceptional connectors, facilitators, social catalysts, and stewards for the community. ALAN, MATT, and ROY are good examples of experienced core-group members whose roles have evolved over time to include activities like coaching newer core-group members and taking the lead on coordinating activities involving core-group members. In ALAN's *becoming* story, he talks about how at some point people started contacting him on email outside of the site. He says, "People go from being just names on a screen to people… It becomes personal." During his experience at the rendezvous in Colorado, the importance of relationships outside the online space crystallized for him. When he returned to Germany, he worked with two other core-group members to develop and send out personal welcome emails to members that were either stationed in Germany or who were Military Intelligence officers like himself. He also continued, now with more clarity of purpose, hosting BBQs at his house for current and potential core-group members. This type of leadership indicates a core-group member whose role is evolving.

Both MATT and ROY—the only two participants who attended two rendezvous—describe how their role evolved from strictly learning during the first rendezvous to coaching and mentoring newer members at the second rendezvous:

> **MATT:** A year later, when we were in Colorado at the…second Rendezvous, I felt like my role switched a little bit from consumer to more of seeing how I could contribute to the learning process for the new people… Having been in the CompanyCommand system for two years by this point, I kind of understood how to do stuff. I started trying to help teach others how to do stuff and how to look at the website in terms of the philosophy and that sort of thing because I felt kind of like a disciple at this point now that I knew and understood what was going on a little bit better than those guys fresh off the block… I personally saw the lights go on for guys. They're just like, huh, you know, I can do that. And then next thing you know everyone's got their laptops open and they're fiddling around with the website… I definitely felt that [my role was changing]—in a good way. And I think it kind of felt good…
>
> **ROY:** Somehow at this next rendezvous I was the guy that some people were turning to and saying, "What do you think about this? Is this feasible?" And that kind of caught me off guard; I

> was like what the hell are you asking me for? …And understand, I'm not saying that I became like a leader of the group or anything because I don't think that's the case // but somehow I became something resembling an old hand when in reality I was only a guy who had been doing this for about a year or so. And I'm not sure where that transition happened, but it happened. And so I found myself at the Colorado meeting being a little more active and taking a little more of a mentoring and shaping approach with other members, as well as with the site content, which was a very odd transition for me. And I'm still kind of sorting through, still kind of sorting through that transition in my mind.

Their experience as core-group members allows them to have a significant impact on newer core-group members—and their distance from command does not lessen that impact. This realization can be liberating for leaders like MATT and ROY. Thus, core-group members often take on additional responsibility commensurate with their experience as core-group members. As they evolve, so do their roles, becoming coaches and mentors for the emerging leaders in the forum.

It is important to note that not all core-group members make this transition. One of the participants provides an interesting example of a core-group member who did not enjoy the evolving role. He had been a prolific contributor and took great satisfaction from that role in the community. In this excerpt, he describes the sense of loss that he felt when he realized that his role was evolving.

> My "what have I done to help you out" role has changed to, "what can I do to find the other people who have had this experience, and get them involved with those guys who are over there now." [As I've acted in the facilitator and steward roles], I've realized that this is kind of what it's gonna be like now from here on out and I was, you know, it kind of, it kind of [pause] not bothered // I guess it bothered me a little bit because I had really enjoyed being the active member as opposed to being the guy who now is a facilitator, so to speak, because I don't know if I fall into that role really well; I don't, I don't know.

There is an element of tension for this participant as he negotiates his own identity in the forum. This excerpt introduces the idea that some core-group members may not naturally transition into other roles in support of the community.

Another option for core-group members, which is perhaps an option that arrives for everyone at some point, is to gradually disengage from the CC forum while simultaneously engaging in the community of practice associated with their next job: for example, jobs like operations officer and battalion executive officer, which are jobs that majors hold. In this way, the *becoming* story is much larger than just the CC forum. These leaders are becoming members of the profession—a career-long process—and their time

engaged in the CC forum propels them forward in that developmental journey. One way to think about both of these stories is in terms of identity and commitment. Over time, identity evolves and officers become more committed members of the profession. Disengagement from the CC core group is likely a seamless part of a professional's centripetal movement, where full participation is couched in terms of the never-ending process of becoming a professional Army officer.

And, interestingly, the nature of the core-group-member roles—especially the connector and social catalyst roles—are such that a core-group member can continue to live those roles out, even when they are no longer active in the online forum proper. Past core-group members stay loosely connected and remain available to the core group as a source of knowledge should they be needed; moreover, they often encourage the junior leaders they work with to participate in the forum. The sentiment of the participants is "once a member, always a member." MARTIN captures this: "The truth is, I'll be coming back to CompanyCommand for the rest of my career now." The sense one gets is that although the participants may transition out of an active core-group-member role, they will always be committed to the purpose of the forum and will continue to be advocates and remain part of the wider CC network.

**The Core Group Phenomenon is a *Social* Phenomenon**

One finding of this research is that the core-group phenomenon is a social phenomenon. This is a critical point, one which I did not fully appreciate before the research began. Initially, I defined *core group* as the small group of active members that is responsible for the majority of activity in the community of practice. Notwithstanding the use of the word group in the definition, the social nature of the phenomenon is missing. One interpretation of this definition could be that the core group is simply a grouping of the most active, but not necessarily interdependent, members. The literature which I relied on most in the shaping of my early understanding likewise does not clarify the interdependencies of the core-group members:

> The first [of three levels of participation] is a small core group of people who actively participate in discussions, even debates, in the public community forum. They often take on community projects, identify topics for the community to address, and move the community along its learning

> agenda. This group is the heart of the community. As the community matures, this core group takes on much of the community's leadership, its members becoming auxiliaries to the community coordinator. But this group is usually rather small, only 10 to 15 percent of the whole community (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002, 56).

Although these interdependencies are implicit, I initially put my emphasis on understanding the individual core-group members. What became quite clear in the research is that social interdependencies in the core group are of critical import, and I therefore introduce an updated definition: *The core-group phenomenon in a distributed community of practice is the development of a small, socially connected and committed group of members that takes responsibility for the majority of activity in the system.*

**Research Question 2: What does it mean to the members to be part of the core group?**

The three-interview method is structured such that the final interview creates the opportunity for the participants to reflect upon what they have shared in the first two interviews, to create new connections, and to articulate the meaning that their experience holds for them. Schutz, in *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, writes:

> It is misleading to say that experiences have meaning. Meaning does not lie in the experience. Rather, those experiences are meaningful which are grasped reflectively. The meaning is the way in which the Ego regards its experience. The meaning lies in the attitude of the Ego toward that part of its stream of consciousness which has already flowed by… (1967, 69).

In line with Schutz' concept that experiences become meaningful reflectively, I began the third interviews with this question: "As you've reflected on the first two interviews, has anything emerged for you? Have you made any connections that weren't there before?" What I found in every case was that the first two interviews had stimulated the participants' thinking and new ideas and connections had in fact emerged. By starting with this question, I was able to reestablish rapport and to get us back into the flow of conversation. When I felt the timing was appropriate, I asked a question directly about meaning. For example, "As you reflect back on your time being part of this team, what has it meant to you to be involved like this?" And I asked a third question focused on meaning that underpinned their ongoing commitment to the work—in other words, meaning-making that has influenced their continued participation: "You invest a lot of time and thought into your role with the team. I'm wondering what

drives you to do this. What causes you to continue investing so much into this?" Talking about meaning is not something people do very often, and these were not easy questions for me to ask. However, the participants—at this point in the three-interview process—were willing and able to respond. I also noticed that when I looked at the transcripts of the earlier interviews through a "meaning" lens, there were connections to meaning in most of the stories that the participants told.

Wenger writes, "Meaning arises out of active participation in practice" (1991, 114). Moreover, he makes the point that the "…process by which we experience the world and our engagement in it as meaningful" is negotiated:

> Meaning is not pre-existing, but neither is it simply made up. Negotiated meaning is at once both historical and dynamic, contextual and unique… The meaningfulness of our engagement in the world is not a state of affairs, but a continual process of renewed negotiation… Meaning exists neither in us, nor in the world, but in the dynamic relation of living in the world (1998, 54).

For the participants in this study, their experiences as core-group members are iterative and ongoing, and the meaningfulness of their engagement in the community of practice is, as Wenger wrote, "a continual process of renewed negotiation."

When I studied the participants' stories, looking specifically at the idea of meaning, topics that are common across the participants emerged. The topics crystallized into three major themes that influence the creation of meaning for people when it comes to their work with the CC forum:

1. *To contribute* (give back): "It is meaningful for me to give back, to make a contribution to something I value." This occurs both in terms of contributing to another person as well as to the corporate body.

2. *To connect* (relationships and solidarity): "It is meaningful for me that I am becoming more connected to this band of brothers—this community of like-hearted leaders who are committed to a common cause." This includes a sense of camaraderie and being part of something bigger than self.

3. *To personally develop* (improved effectiveness): "It is meaningful that I am becoming more personally effective as a result of being involved."

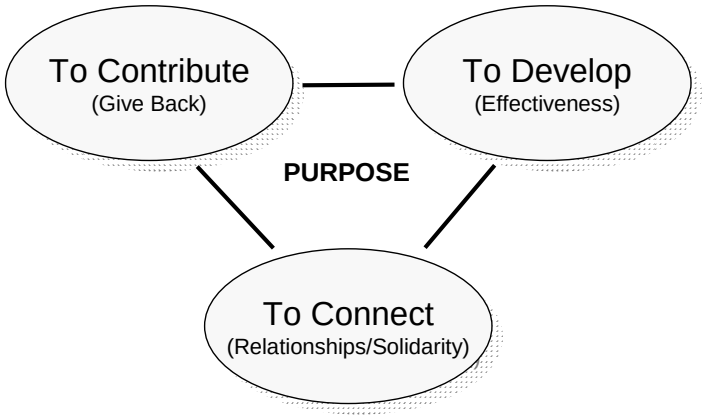


**Figure 5: Meaning-Making Components (Situated in Purpose)**

All three themes are meaningful as they relate to the context and purpose of the CC forum, which is to improve the effectiveness of company commanders and to advance the practice of company command. To clarify this important point, *contribution*, *connection*, and *personal development* are purposeful in that they all relate directly back to the work to which these leaders have committed themselves: being Army professionals. The members' *contribution* is situated in the context of helping Army company commanders become more effective as well as advancing the profession more generally. The members' *connection* occurs in the context of relationships with people that share their professional aspirations; and the members' *personal development* is situated in the context of becoming more effective Army leaders. In this way, meaning is situated in purpose.

When they engage in the work of being core-group members, they have experiences that are personally meaningful. In other words, meaning cannot be separated from behavior. The participants, like most human beings, desire their work to be meaningful; however, it is less likely that the desire for meaning creates the initial behavior (what they do as core-group leaders), and more likely that the experiences they have, as a result of what they do, are meaningful to them in the context of who they are and what they value. As a result of their having meaningful experiences in the process of being core-group members, the participants' behavior is reinforced. Thus, over time, behavior and meaning are self-reinforcing, and we could therefore say that the meaning core-group members make of their experiences

helps sustain their participation and their participation provides them meaning. Lave and Wenger, writing in the book in which they coined the term community of practice, describe it this way:

> Participation [in a community of practice] is always based on situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in the world. This implies that understanding and experience are in constant interaction—indeed, are mutually constitutive" (1991, pp. 51-52).

Participation and meaning are mutually constitutive: participation provides meaning to members and the meaning members make of their experiences sustains their participation.[1]

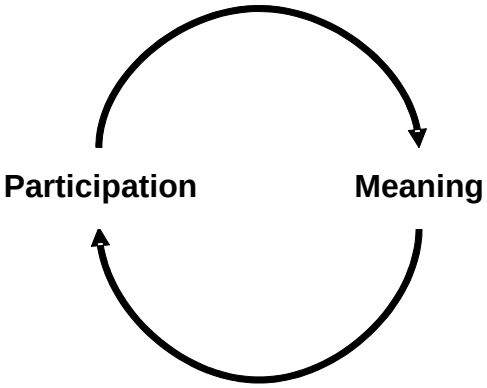


**Figure 6: Participation and Meaning**

In "Revisiting the Meaning of Leadership," Podolny, Khurana, and Hill-Popper derive a definition of meaningful action within organizations, drawing from French and German social theory (e.g., Rousseau, Weber, and Durkheim):

> An action is meaningful when its undertaking: (1) supports some ultimate end that the individual personally values; and (2) affirms the individual's connection to the community of which he or she is a part… One component…emphasizes that meaning is created when action is directed toward a broader ideal; the other component…emphasizes the importance of [social] relationships to meaning (2005, 13-14).

The first two meaning themes that emerged in my research—contribution and connection—strongly support this definition. I will discuss those themes now, and I will add one more component to this definition for meaningful action in a community of practice: action is meaningful when it *personally develops the individual*.

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[1] We might also say that human activity produces a world and the world (and the meaning we make of it) produces human activity. See Wenger's work on "participation and reification" (1998); Karl Weick's "enactment" (1979); Weber's "iron cage" (1930); Giddens' dual nature of structure known as structuration;" and Berger and Luckmann's description of "the relationship between man, the producer, and the social world, his product as a *dialectical relationship*" (1966).

**(1) To Contribute (give back):** "It is meaningful for me to give back, to make a contribution to something I value."

This occurs in terms of contributing to someone or something I value. The intrinsic desire core-group members have to give back and to make a difference for other members and for the Army profession—both of which they hold in high regard—feeds this. This was, perhaps, the most obvious of the three meaning themes.

MATT introduces the theme nicely:

> It's neat to be reeled back into something bigger and better than an Army of one... I think [leaders are all]…looking for job satisfaction. They want to know that they are doing something that matters, something meaningful and they're making an impact. When you leave command, you leave the band of brothers. [While in command], we all thought that we were making an impact…and that's what really fueled us... We would be willing to work 24/7. And then once you leave command you are just kind of like, "Oh, what do I do now?" [And so you appreciate it when] someone bumps into you and asks you to do something that's meaningful, that has a purpose—it gives you a reason to wake up on Saturdays.[2]

Several participants talk about the meaning of their contribution in terms of their legacy. MARTIN says, "We gotta look out for each other; we gotta try and make a difference for each other. I guess it really comes down to that. When I retire I want to be able to look back on my career and say I made a difference; I made it better in some way, shape or form." DALE puts it this way:

> Every commander wants to leave a legacy…and the best thing that I can think of as a legacy is how well your people work…after you've gone; the missions they executed and how you have affected the junior leaders' development… That's kind of what CompanyCommand gives you an ability to do if you're a guy who has already commanded—it gives you a way to reach back and maybe help one other guy. If you leave one piece of your knowledge, it may help another guy. And that becomes part of your command legacy.

TERRY adds:

> The concept of CompanyCommand is so cool: there is no personal gain to be had; [rather], it is a matter of making our profession better. I was just so profoundly impacted by that and inspired myself to look above how this is gonna benefit me… I always looked at trying to give back, but this was a way where I could go above and beyond just providing leadership to a unit by contributing to my fellow commanders and in so doing, reach so many more people in the profession and help them be more proficient…

[2] Here MATT was reflecting on being asked to help facilitate leader-development seminars for future company commanders, which took place on Saturdays.

> I only have a little bit of time left on earth to contribute… Aside from my religious affiliation…how can I contribute to those that are around me? How can I make this career or profession I chose be meaningful? …Being a member of CompanyCommand.com, I'm now a part of a team that is reaching across the world, very quickly sharing and growing the expertise of the profession. You could be helping somebody [within minutes] of them posting the comment. And not only are you helping them and answering their question, you may be generating thinking or developing others who just like to read and were like, "Wow, I never thought of that." And so it's contributing to our profession in a powerful way at the company level, and the same people that we're affecting now are gonna be the future generals and sergeants major. And so, you know, being able to have that kind of impact on somebody now and into the future is just cool—what else can you say? [chuckle] There's probably a lot better words than that but, you know, it's huge. [pause] And it covers a lifetime, and it's just a meaningful way to // one, it provides meaning to what I do being a member of this Army profession—it gives back—it contributes to others. I think it's important to leave a unit or organization a little better than when you found it. What better way to leave an organization than developing the leaders that lead those organizations?

And ROY provides another example of how contributing to others is meaningful:

> It is enormously personally satisfying to me to see stories like [Name], where I can say I had a tangible impact. All of us love to be able to look back at our career and be able to see tangible impacts and effects of our leadership… And all of us have had those times in our careers where we just didn't feel like we were contributing anything, and so being able to look back and put your finger on those tangible moments I think is really gratifying for all of us. And CompanyCommand gives me another opportunity to do that…

It is interesting that many of the participants couched the meaning of their participation in the CC forum in terms of their legacy, both to people and to the profession.

ROY identifies an important point: contribution takes on greater meaning when the person contributing has tangible evidence of the impact he is making—something that does not always occur when the contribution occurs via the Internet. The experience of contributing to the captain who needs advice dealing with her first casualty situation takes on meaning for ROY when he becomes aware of her receiving his email and finding his input beneficial. Without her reply, he is not sure she even got the email. It is the tangible evidence of contribution that infuses the experience with meaning for ROY.

JOHN found meaning in the personal feedback from other members who responded to his contribution. He says, "It's nice, and it feels good when you contribute and it's appreciated. You know, when you get a comment or something. That feels good because I like to get an azimuth check on what

I'm thinking." This is another example of how feedback from another person can infuse one's contribution experience with meaning.

And, in some cases, this feedback can be designed into the technology system. SHAWN describes how he was frustrated early on when he thought that no one was seeing his topic; and, he describes how a little feedback—designed into the online system—gave him a better sense for the impact that his contribution was having.

> [Lately] I have been clicking on that upper right-hand corner [link that shows you the names of members who have visited the page]… [Before], I was getting cheesed off because I'm like, "Why is it that nobody's adding stuff to *Pro Reading*?" And I finally clicked up on that upper right-hand corner and I'm like, "Damn," you know—197 hits last week—*that's* cool. It kind of shows you the // …It's just cool to see that there are guys out there that actually give a crap, and that's the kind of thing that fires me up.

And TERRY reinforces this point when he says,

> In the beginning I'm going, "Is anybody using this *Supply* topic?" Then [Technology Leader] figured out how to show how many hits one particular Web page is getting within the site… And so now it's meaningful to me 'cause I'm like, "Wow, there are a lot of people using this!"

SHAWN and TERRY's contribution took on new meaning when they gained awareness of who was visiting their online topics. A sense for the social presence in their topic changed the meaning of their experience.

Part of the sense of meaning that the participants draw from their involvement is related to the combat experience theme. They understand the life-and-death stakes involved and their contribution therefore becomes more meaningful. Take MARTIN, for example:

> Maybe they're deeply disturbed about the fact that they're gonna be deploying, they're scared to death that one of their guys is gonna get killed, and he's out there looking for that information that's gonna try and keep his guy alive. Well, when we get on there and we start talking about this stuff maybe some guy just off-handedly gives him that one piece of information that's gonna tie it all together, that's gonna allay this leader's fears and let him bring everybody back, you know?

And SHAWN reinforces this:

> [Our] soldiers deserve the best and most competent leaders, and I do it [actively participate in CC] because of that, and I do it because I've looked a spouse in the face and said, "I'm gonna bring your husband home safe," and I do it because I love being a soldier, and I do it because I love those soldiers—and that's why. Does it cause me to…lose a bit of sleep? Sure. But the

> rewards… it's the word priceless. I know that when I leave CompanyCommand.com as a topic lead…I will have improved the Army profession and I will have, hopefully, saved soldiers' lives.

CHRIS adds to this:

> I'm giving back to my profession… I'm helping as much as I can… It's something personal… I like the memorial for our fallen comrades… The bottom line [purpose of what we are doing] is to shorten that list of fallen comrades… I've lost two friends in combat so far, and it hit me kind of hard [when I found out about one of them dying when my wife] and I sat up next to the screen together and read about it. [Name] was a good guy; he was a good man, and people need to realize that the work is…being done so that you can…make your organization better, [and] so we can shorten that list.

Thus, the context in which core-group members contribute influences the potential for their participation to be meaningful. The fact that the CC community is so focused on leadership in combat likely magnifies the potential for contribution to be meaningful.

Another aspect of contribution that creates meaning for the participants is when they have a sense of ownership for contributing to something new, something that would not exist without their having been a part of the team. In a separate study of four company command core-group members, Dixon, et al. referred to this as license to be creative:

> They feel the pride that comes from knowing that their own ideas and energy are making a difference. This ability to take responsibility for a certain product is also self-reinforcing; people always have the most energy and enthusiasm for something they have built themselves, for something they create (2005, 71).

MATT provides an exceptional example of this. He created a new topic in the online forum specifically to honor company commanders who die in combat. In this story, you see the power of relationships and personal development themes; however, I share the story here to highlight how meaningful it can be for a person to create something new:

> For me the real turning point in terms of me being inspired to participate was [during an on-fire rendezvous] when I was sitting in Starbucks with NICK, and he was teaching me how to do stuff on the website… It was a one-on-one training session. And that was important to me for a couple of reasons. One, you know, NICK's one I always looked up to a lot and to me it was just like, wow, I get an hour with NICK—that's cool. But second though was I had an idea in my mind and it was called the *Hall of Honor*…and I told NICK as we were sitting there in Starbucks. He and I built that part of the site like in twenty minutes, and we put up the first guy on…the *Hall of Honor*. So he and I put a guy named [name]… NICK showed me how to put the picture in there, how to hyperlink the article about [Name], and we had our first honoree in our *Hall of Honor* and I thought, wow, this is cool—not only did I get to hang out with NICK for an hour, but he took an idea that I had and basically ran with me to bring it to fruition—it was no longer an idea. And so

> that inspired me to start, when I got home, I was, "Well, let's see who else deserves to be in here." …It started to snowball and I was like, "Wow, this is kind of cool, this is something I was able to contribute that wasn't there before." ...And so that's kind of what really inspired me to get deeper, to deepen my involvement in the website.

MATT contributed by creating a new topic to honor fallen commanders, and that experience inspired him to become more involved. When people create new things that contribute to something that they value, it is meaningful.

Additionally, core-group members find it meaningful when people they know, and perhaps recruited, contribute. RANDY, talking about a member who worked for him at one time says, "In a sense, his contribution to the website—when he posts something—I feel that I had a hand in that… Just maybe, I had something to do with getting him to share. When I see guys that I've worked with get out there and contribute like that, that makes me feel good." In a similar way, people find it meaningful to be part of a group that is making a valued contribution. In other words, by being part of the core-group, members can feel good about the contributions of the CC forum in general. This aspect will be covered further in the *connect* theme.

In summary, members find it meaningful to give back and to make a contribution to someone or something they value. They often think about this in terms of what their legacy will be. Moreover, for a contribution to be meaningful, the person must be able to see the connection between action and impact. Contributions are more meaningful when the person contributing has tangible evidence of the difference their contribution made. Some contribution experiences, simply by the nature of the situation, have more potential for meaning. For example, helping someone in a life-or-death situation will likely be more meaningful than helping someone cross the street. Moreover, the more involved in the creation process members are—especially bringing their own ideas to fruition—the more meaningful their participation will likely be. Finally, core-group members find it meaningful when people they have recruited, or otherwise are connected to, contribute, and they also find meaning as a result of the collective contribution the forum is making.

**(2) To Connect (relationships and solidarity):** "It is meaningful for me that I am becoming more connected to this band of brothers—this community of like-hearted leaders who are committed to a common cause."

The members' *connection* occurs in the context of relationships with people that share their professional aspirations, which is why the word solidarity is important. Providing a basic definition, the American Heritage Dictionary defines solidarity as "a union of interests, purposes, or sympathies among members of a group; fellowship of responsibilities and interests" (2000). Drawing upon the work of Rousseau, Podolny et al. add complexity to the concept when they write: "the quest for meaning is attained through social communion, a process in which an individual realizes herself through achieving solidarity in transparent relationships with others" (2005, 14). They go on to write, "As was the case for Rousseau, Durkheim proposes that for action to be meaningful, the enactment of values or purpose needs to occur in the context of community"—which Durkheim calls the "conscience collective" (2005, 14).

It is quite obvious from the beginning of this paper that the core-group phenomenon is truly a human phenomenon. The *becoming* stories and especially the discussion of the on-fire rendezvous (team meetings), communicate how meaningful the relationship and social cohesion component of the participants' experience is.

One aspect of *connection* that is meaningful to the participants is when their participation in the CC forum transcends the online forum. JOHN talks about his experience becoming "personal" when he began meeting people as a result of his involvement. And ALAN says,

> But somewhere around that time, I started doing business offline with people and that made it more personal. You start thinking about, okay, these aren't just random people out there; You now see the pattern where all these guys are showing up and…they go from being just names on a screen to people that you associate things with.

Participation in the forum becomes personal, or, as some participants described it, "real," when they begin interacting with people and developing relationships. This kind of experience changes the way that the participants look at the CC forum. And when that "off-line" interaction occurs face-to-face, it is especially powerful. Several months after ALAN noticed that his participation had transcended the online

forum, he attended the annual team meeting: "I got to know that there are a lot of other people out there who are bit by the bug—who have the same crazy devotion to the movement of CompanyCommand." The meeting crystallized for ALAN the sense of solidarity—that fellowship of responsibilities and aspirations that the core-group members share.

Another way that the importance of relationships is evident in this study is in the number of times that names were mentioned in the interviews. And, perhaps not surprisingly, the names the participants mentioned are often the names of the other core-group members. If there truly were threads of connection running between the core-group members, the core group would be woven together in a tapestry of relationships. TOMMY and NICK are life-long friends; MARTIN's unit took over from ROY's unit in Iraq; ROY and MATT attended graduate school together; CHRIS previously served in the same battalion with RICK and went to the officer basic course with LUKE; DALE served with JAMES; MATT was close friends with MITCH and knew NICK; PAUL met RANDY in Iraq; a relationship between ALAN and ROY formed online; ALAN invited MARTIN over for a BBQ; SHAWN met NICK years prior in Korea, etc. And the interconnections radically increased when these leaders became core-group members and started interacting in that capacity online, meeting at face-to-face events like the annual rendezvous meeting, and sharing developmental experiences like presenting at a leader development seminar.

The stories of the participants reveal the value that they place on the relationships that they have as a result of being actively involved. TERRY says:

> I have enjoyed being a part of the experience, the ride and even more so getting to meet all of [the core group] because just what a great bunch of people… The people of CompanyCommand.com make it all worthwhile, let alone the mission and just seeing all the good that comes out of it—units that much more prepared for combat or being that much more successful than maybe they would have been because they had somebody they could go and ask a question of or they could go and find something out. So, yeah, it's been awesome.

This excerpt highlights the value TERRY places on the relationships and it also underscores the sense of solidarity he feels because of the common cause to which the core-group members are committed: "the mission." DALE values the contacts he has developed as a result of being involved, and again draws attention to the solidarity aspect of this theme:

> And, really, you know, the personal contacts that you form between people, you know, it's contagious, man. I just think it feeds on itself when you got a group of people that are all willing or all have a desire to make something grow. I think that's just part of being a leader in the Army—you wanna be a part of something bigger and better than yourself.

He finds it meaningful to be connected to other people who, like himself, are committed to something "bigger and better" than self. And here SHAWN reflects about some of the people he has valued relationships with because of his involvement with the CC forum:

> It's amazing to me how diverse the site is. There are so many things out there that I never would have known, I never would have thought about // I never would have talked to TOMMY; I never would have talked to NICK after he left Korea; I never would have talked to ROY; I never would have talked to RANDY; I never would have talked to, you know, anybody who is not in my immediate circle of peers inside of 1st Brigade, 10th Mountain or the guys down here. And, you know, like I said, I'm a people person; I like to talk to people…

The participants value the connections because they genuinely appreciate the people—the relationships are meaningful in-and-of themselves; and, there is a sense that, together, they are forming something bigger and better than what they are alone. This is, to borrow from MATT's description, the "band-of-brothers" effect. The relationships, camaraderie, and common commitment to advancing the profession are all very meaningful to them.

**(3) To Personally Develop (improved effectiveness).** "It is meaningful that I am becoming more personally effective as a result of being involved."

The participants recognize that their participation is having a personally developmental impact—and they value this. This theme is less obvious to the participants than were the other two *meaning themes*; it was less obvious to me as well. In the end, however, *personal development* experiences may prove to be the most powerful meaning-inducing type of experiences that the participants have.

Recall the impact that *using and benefiting from participating in the CC forum* had on the participants' *becoming* stories. Many of the participants consider the CC forum to be integral to their work effectiveness. DALE's development as a company commander was integrated with his participation in the CC forum. When he had a training dilemma, for example, he posed it as a question in the forum and was able to pull together a significant training event based in part on what he learned:

> …Based on the discussions and all the training strategies and ideas that were brought to me through the forum, I pulled everything together… And it was just an awesome training event that I might not have stumbled across if I didn't have all these great guys in CompanyCommand.mil kind of feeding me: "Hey, look, think about ways to do these types of things." And so because of the professional discussions we were having, I was able to make that leap and grow not only as an HHC commander, but grow some really good training for my troopers…
>
> I was able to pull other things [off CC] that were just awesome—like the training SOPs that [Name] wrote. I mean that was just kick ass. …I tweaked it for an Armor HHC and I went and I put it into play and it had huge benefits for me.

There appears to be a correlation between DALE's participation in the forum and his effectiveness commanding his unit; DALE certainly takes that for granted, and as a result, his participation is more meaningful to him.

Moreover, the participants recognize that in the process of sharing their own experiences in the online forum, they are learning. DALE is very aware of this and describes learning and giving back (contributing) as two sides of the same coin:

> It's a way to give back and I can continue to learn from giving back. And that's the real beauty of it—by giving back to that site and giving back to company commanders in general, I continue to learn more about myself and what I did in command… It gives me a chance to put what I know out there, continue to learn from others, and then it gives me a frame of reference or a snapshot into a segment of the Army at a given point in time, and that's invaluable…

DALE loves to learn. To him, participation is "almost like a drug, it's addictive in nature," and it's powerful:

> And it's a powerful thing when a whole segment of the Army comes together and says, okay, let's look critically at ourselves, let's look critically at what we're doing and let's figure out on our own how to go ahead… To be involved as I am has been an opportunity (a) to affect future generations of commanders, and (b) to help maybe commanders like myself who are just out of command to understand a little bit more what the heck it was we actually did or those on the back side now that it's all done and we got a chance to catch our breath // What does it all mean—when you boil it down—what does it really mean to have commanded soldiers.

He recognizes that sharing what he has learned and getting feedback from others will help him more fully understand and learn from his command experience. This is an interesting insight. What DALE recognizes is that an experienced commander has an opportunity to learn after his command experience is over through the social process of active reflection in community.

Another way that participants integrated the CC forum into their work, and became more effective as a result, was by participating in the CC professional reading program. DALE, SHAWN, ROY, and ALAN all selected books to read and discuss with the leaders that they were developing.[3] In the participants' stories about the reading program, it is evident that the experience was developmental for them as well as for their subordinate leaders—which further reinforced the value that they placed on their participation in the forum.

There also seems to be an intentional effort by the CC forum coordinators to introduce core-group members to leadership development books. The participants are becoming more personally effective as a result of reading and discussing the books with each other. Although all the participants experienced this, perhaps TERRY gained the most personally as a result. During the interviews, he rattled off the titles of a dozen books he has read as a direct result of being part of the core group, one of which was Malcolm Gladwell's, *The Tipping Point* (2000). Here TERRY describes the impact the book had on his work as a tactical officer developing cadets at the United States Military Academy:

> *The Tipping Point* was very influential in changing how I did business as a TAC [tactical officer]… It greatly influenced [me], and I shared it with my company commander and my platoon leaders as a way they could be better at what they do. We saw a lot of great changes and improved performance… And Malcolm Gladwell [the author] was just here [at West Point]. I got to hear the man directly… But, like I said, none of that would have been possible without CompanyCommand.com.

TERRY, in the process of reflecting on this aspect of his involvement with CC, commented that not only has he and the leaders he leads been positively influenced, but so has his family.

The *personal development* theme is interconnected with the participants' desire to learn, and professionally develop. Here, you see how professional-development-type experiences—and even the possibility for them—are meaningful for DALE:

> Think about it, though—by getting involved in the site I had an opportunity to go to the Land Combat Expo [in Germany]. Didn't do it because of family reasons, but the opportunity was extended to me to do it. The opportunity was extended to me to do the On Fire Rendezvous [in

[3] When a company commander selects a book to read and discuss with his or her team, the CC forum sends him or her copies of the book and creates an online discussion forum for the team to discuss the reading. For a description of this, see Chapter 3: "Talking About Books," in *CompanyCommand: Unleashing the Power of the Army Profession* (Dixon, et al., 2005).

> Colorado]. I have no doubt in the future that there may be other opportunities for me to do things that I didn't think I'd get to do otherwise. So I mean it's professional development for me at the same time as it is giving back to company commanders, as it is helping out the team. There are so many different ways in which it's professional development—it's cool. There's no other word to really say it—it's a great group of people. Everybody understands we're all volunteers so, you know, it's not this additional duty that you have to do.

RANDY, who traveled to Germany with the team, found that experience professionally and personally rewarding:

> I had never been to Germany, so I was like, "Yeah, I wanna go." …It was a great deal. I tell you what—I really enjoyed that. I listened to the Sergeant Major of the Army speak and General Bell speak and General Wallace. General Wallace was interesting because he obviously was our corps commander [in Iraq]… There was a lot of talk about transformation which was doubly interesting for me working at TRADOC and that focused me when I got back to Fort Monroe… That was a great thing about going to Heidelberg—you are exposed to some of that stuff and you get to talk to a bunch of people…

The participants value these types of experiences that introduce them to new ideas, people, and places.

Building on this idea, several participants were given opportunities to participate in leadership and knowledge management conferences, to include presenting their own stories. Presenting in public about the CC forum seems to be an especially meaningful experience. ROY talked about the impact that such an experience had on him. MATT also was a part of several conferences and seminars, and served as a facilitator in a few. Reflecting on his first face-to-face facilitation experience at a leader-development seminar, MATT describes how much of a learning experience it was for him. In his description, you see that this invitation required him to move a little out of his comfort zone:

> I remember not really being sure of what I was getting into. I remember going across the river [driving to the seminar location on a Saturday morning] and getting lost. I got lost on the way there and I was so worried about being late. I think TOMMY was the only dude I knew there that first time… He put me on a table [as a facilitator] with some very junior captains and I remember that he went through the rock and the sand analogy from the books… I remember some discussion at round tables, but it was just as new for me as it was for the captains. I might as well have been one of the captains, because I thought I was less of a contributor and more of a consumer… And then [there I was], a facilitator [chuckle] The second one was definitely a lot easier.

MATT talks about how meaningful it was to be around those young captains, and to feel like he was making a contribution; however, another reason he valued the experience, though he did not state it explicitly at first, is that he was learning and gaining new skills as a facilitator. Later, MATT describes

his experience presenting at three iterations of a civilian leadership/knowledge management forum and describes it as a two-way learning experience, to include becoming a more effective public speaker:

> As a topic lead I think [the KLF conference] definitely helped me out, and I think the reason why is because it forced me to take the idea and intent of the website—the website's purpose—and to be able to // You can't talk about it unless you understand it, and so it forced me to understand what is the purpose of CompanyCommand.com, why does it exist, and how do we as the team try to achieve the vision… When we prepared to talk about this stuff with a civilian group, you have to convert the whole military thing to "civilian speak," you know, and it's almost like a translation if you will… [Each time I've done one of these presentations], I've gone back to the *CompanyCommand* book [Dixon, et al., 2005] to review…what we are before I can communicate it to others. And so you almost have to become a subject matter expert. And I remember at my first KLF function I was not there at all [in terms of my own knowledge], and then what compounded it was I only had like a ten minute window to talk. It was like boom, boom—you know, ten minutes is nothing. And so, you know, what was my sound bite out of that? What was the take away for the people? I don't know—I don't even remember it was so fast. And so now I've kind of figured it out a little bit better since then, but you really gotta be able to know what you're talking about especially when you're dealing with this completely different group who is not military.

And, finally, MATT describes his sense for the development that he underwent from the first seminar he helped facilitate to the present:

> The professional growth that I feel like I've made since my first Rally Point to my most recent KLF function…is huge. My whole way of looking at things, my whole way of expressing things, and my way of looking at leadership totally changed.

The process of reflecting on these experiences during the interviews triggered this "ah ha" moment for MATT and allowed him to more fully appreciate his own development as a leader.

In summary, the participants find it especially meaningful to be learning and developing as a result of their participation in the forum. Increasing participation leads to increasing access to people, ideas, and opportunities for *personal development*—all of which they appreciate.

The second research question led me to look at the experience of core-group members through the lens of meaning. A finding of this research is that the participants' experience as core-group members is meaningful to them in particular ways. When the participants engage in the work of being a core-group member, they have meaningful experiences. Building on the research of Podolny et al., the types of experiences that are meaningful to the participants can be organized in three main categories, something I call the three *meaning-making components*: *contribution*, *connection*, and *personal development*.

Moreover, drawing from previous research by Lave and Wenger, I found that participation and meaning are mutually constitutive: participation provides meaning to the participant and the meaning participants make of their experiences influences the nature of their continued participation.

It is possible now to update the *becoming-a-core-group-member* structure to include the iterative process of participation and meaning (see Figures 7 and 8 below). At some point in the iterative process of participation and connection—often in conjunction with the member undertaking a leadership role—participation evolves, the connection component is integrated into the member's participation, and the experience begins to take on greater meaning.

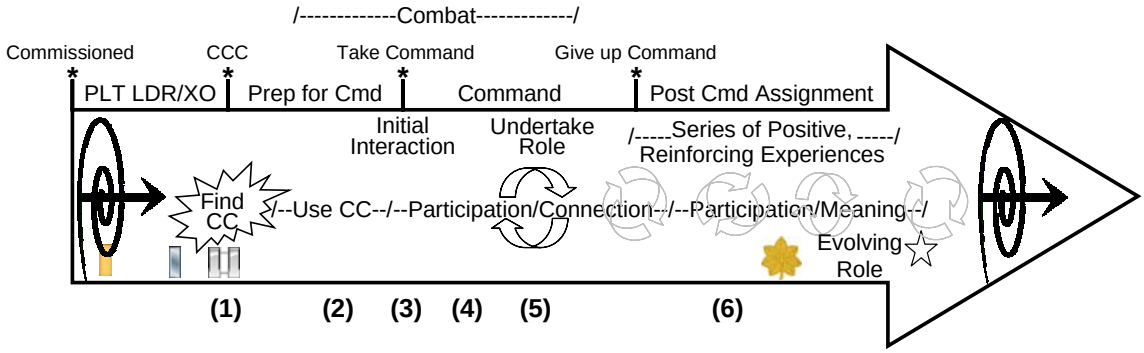


**Figure 7: Updated Core-Group *Becoming* Structure**

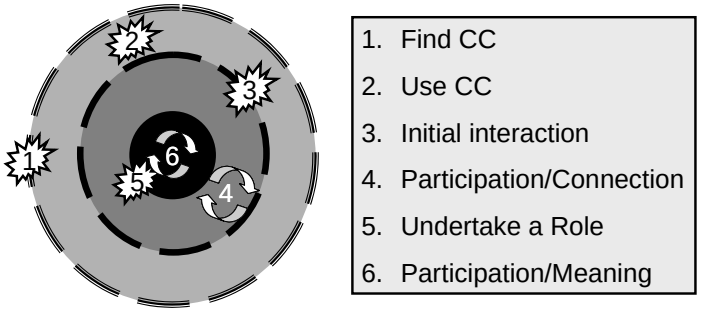


**Figure 8: Updated Cross-Section View of Core-Group *Becoming* Structure**

## Conclusion

The core-group phenomenon is the development of a small, socially connected and committed group of members that takes responsibility for the majority of activity in an informal social system. It is remarkable, for example, that as few as fifty interconnected, informal leaders generate the majority of

activity within the CC forum, which has over 10,000 members. I conducted in-depth interviews with ten individual members of the CC core group to gain understanding into this phenomenon with a focus on two main research questions: (1) What is the process whereby members travel from the periphery of the community to become part of the core group and (2) What does it mean to the members to be part of the core group. The first part of the research focused on identifying the concrete experiences that stand out as important in the lived experience of the participants. The *becoming*-a-core-group-member structure was depicted as a process, over time. A second, cross-section view of the process drew attention to the centripetal spiral of a member over time.

The most significant parts of this structure, as far as gaining understanding into the core-group phenomenon, were identified. The essential nature of the *becoming* story is most evident in the process of participation and connection (where initial participation is an observable "act" and connection is a thread of affiliation connecting two members). This process begins with the initial interaction and it is continuous thereafter, with a positive, cumulative effect over time. "Acts" of participation increase and connections between people thicken into relationships. At some point in the iterative process of participation and connection, often in conjunction with the member undertaking a leadership role, participation evolves to include additional roles; the connection component is integrated into the member's participation, and the experience begins to take on greater meaning.

The second part of the research described the participants' lived experience through the lens of meaning—and addressed the question, "What does it mean to be a core-group member?" Schutz explains that people are immersed in a stream of lived experience, and their experiences become meaningful only when they step out of the stream and reflect, or shine a "cone of light," retrospectively upon the concrete experiences:

> Each Act of attention to one's own stream of duration may be compared to a cone of light. This cone illuminates already elapsed individual phases of that stream, rendering them bright and sharply defined and, as such, meaningful (1967, 70).

The three-interview method was the impetus for participants to take details from the "stream," and to reconstruct and reflect upon them, to include the meaning they make of them. Wenger writes, "Meaning

arises out of active participation in practice" (1991, 114). Building on this, I argued that meaning arises out of core-group-members' active participation in their practice, in the context of who they are and what they value. Finally, participation and meaning are "in constant interaction—indeed, are mutually constitutive" (Lave and Wenger 1991, pp. 51-52). In this way, the meaning core-group members make of their experiences helps sustain their participation and their participation provides them meaning.

Finally, analysis of the core-group-members' participation experiences yielded a definition of meaningful action in a community of practice, which builds upon the work of Podolny, et al. (2005). An action is meaningful to me when, in the process or as a result, I:

(1) make a tangible contribution to another valued member(s) and/or to the community (*to contribute*);

(2) become more socially connected with and achieve greater solidarity with other members (*to connect*); and

(3) become more personally effective (*to personally develop*).

**Implications for Leadership**

"Maybe there's a lot more people out there that would want to be, that would find it really meaningful and personally satisfying to be involved in this way."[4]

Because participation is so important to the success of communities of practice, it is natural for researchers and practitioners to ask, "What can be done to increase member participation?" This research, however, indicates that a subtle shift in thinking could yield more positive results. A question that might be more aligned with the reality of the informal social system is this: "What can be done to increase the frequency and quality of member experiences, in terms of the meaningfulness of those experiences, as perceived by the members?" One way of framing this shift is in terms of leadership: a shift away from leadership as influence, toward leadership as meaning-creation. We could define

[4] When I listened to the interview recordings, I heard the participants *and* I heard myself. This was me thinking out loud, in a give-and-take conversation with a participant—a mutual inquiry about the core-group phenomenon.

leadership in a community of practice as a process whereby members foster the creation of meaning for each other. Given the findings of this research, it is possible to be more specific: leadership in a community of practice is a process whereby members engage in experiences that (1) make a tangible contribution to each other (*to contribute*); (2) cultivate a more connected social network of members (*to connect*); and (3) develop each other (*personal development*).

This view is reinforced by Drath and Palus, who provide a conception of leadership in a community of practice. They write that members of a community of practice are:

> …already motivated by a desire for increased centrality in the community—increased participation in the more skilled, more knowledgeable aspects of whatever activity the community is organized around. The purpose of the process of leadership in this view is therefore not to create motivation; rather it is to offer legitimate channels for members to act in ways that will increase their feelings of significance and their actual importance to the community (1994, 18).

And:

> The criteria of effectiveness will…look more to the involvement of community members in increasingly central ways—the movement of people from relatively less important, marginal roles toward more important, more central roles; in other words, the criteria will tend to be the rate of increase of significance (1994, 14).

If we use these insights to build upon the implications of this research, the criteria by which we measure the rate of increase of significance (or meaningfulness) may be the vitality of the core group. In other words, we know that leadership is occurring in a community of practice when there are increasing numbers of members who are active and engaged in doing the work of the core group.

As members take action (participate), they have meaningful experiences. Their sense of meaning reinforces their participation. The three *meaning components—contribution, connection, development*—can be envisioned as a pathway to meaning, with stepping stones along that pathway representing the concrete experiences of members' journeys toward meaning in their work.

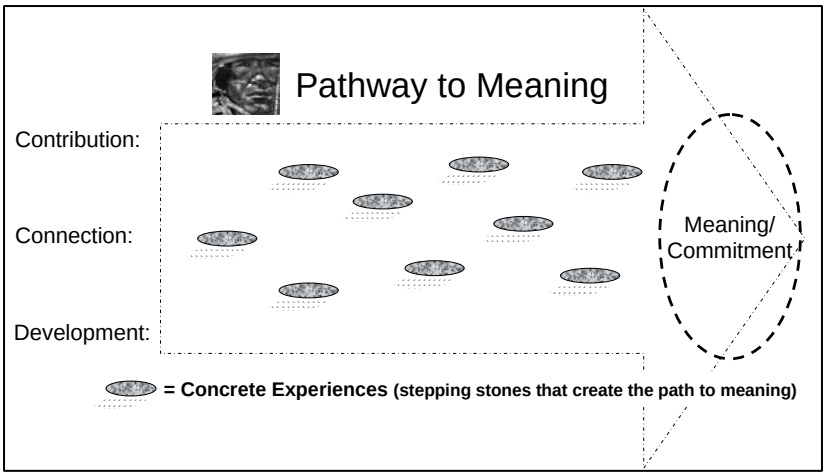


**Figure 9: Pathway to Meaning**

The process of leadership, from this perspective, helps provide stepping stones or creates the conditions for those stepping stones to emerge. Concrete experiences, for example, might include:

- I answer a member's question and receive feedback/tangible evidence that my specific contribution made a difference for her
- I attend a rendezvous meeting with other core-group members
- I undertake responsibility for an idea or topic
- I travel to Germany and facilitate a leader-development seminar with younger members of the profession, etc.

And, finally, we can conceive of any person acting in a way that fosters participation and the creation of meaning to be providing leadership in a community of practice.

I complete this research with a greater understanding of the core-group phenomenon: the idea that a small, socially connected and committed group of people can make a positive difference—for themselves and for the greater community. This research suggests that the experience of being a core-group member is anchored in a mutually reinforcing cycle of participation and meaning, and that core-group-members' participation experiences are meaningful in particular ways. Further analysis yielded a definition for

meaningful action in a community of practice. Finally, the research found that a definition for leadership in communities of practice should position leadership as a process whereby members foster the creation of meaning for each other.

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## Postscript

> "So among those who cooperate the things that are seen are moved by the things unseen. Out of the void comes the spirit that shapes the end of men."
>
> —Chester Barnard (1968)

> "[Adults seeking to live life to the fullest] want to count for something; they want their experiences to be vivid and meaningful; they want their talents to be utilized; they want to know beauty and joy; and they want all of these realizations of their total personalities to be shared in communities of fellowship. Briefly, they want to improve themselves; this is their realistic and primary aim. But they want also to change the social order so that vital personalities will be creating a new environment in which their aspirations may be properly expressed." —Eduard Lindeman (1961)

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