

Improving Outcomes for Learning Networks: The Success Case Method

Shubh Kumar-Range

Abstract Networks and communities of practice for development evaluation have grown rapidly during the past decade. In the interest of exploring new ways of supporting these networks given the competition for resources, it is time to take a systematic look at what is happening, analyze what are the contributors of successful learning networks, and explore where this could lead us. This paper explores the possibilities offered by the Success Case Method for better understanding ways of making new and evolving learning networks effective in delivering the desired results.

Key Words: Communities of Practice, Evaluation Networks, Development Evaluation, Success Case Method

INTRODUCTION

Among the new models of learning that have emerged in the last decade is the concept of Learning Networks and its related Communities of Practice¹. Indeed, the academic literature on organizational learning as a source of competitive advantage has been expanding in unprecedented fashion, drawing much of its basis from business and industry experience (Dyer and Nobeoka, 2000). For example, Teece et al. (1997) have proposed a ‘dynamic

¹ The social nature of knowledge and learning has also been gaining some credence. According to Allee (2000), “Knowledge and learning are social in nature. Knowledge travels through language and every conversation is an experiment in knowledge creation—testing ideas, trying out words and concepts. Continuing conversation builds both tacit and explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is the wealth of know-how that resides in people’s heads, deeply rooted in their life experience and learning. Explicit knowledge is that which gets deliberately shared, documented and communicated. Many people in the knowledge field insist that there is no knowledge outside of people. Externalized knowledge, they claim, is only information. No database or technology system can fully capture and distribute all the knowledge that floats around a company—nor should it. If we respect the way knowledge naturally happens, then we support the communities in which it grows.” From this perspective, networks and practice communities are the most natural and powerful resources for learning and knowledge, and as a result we are seeing a convergence of knowledge management efforts with a focus on learning communities.

capabilities' approach that would enable a firm-level advantage, suggesting that a firm's ability to continually learn, adapt, and upgrade its capabilities is key to competitive success. Other scholars have argued for a 'knowledge-based view of the firm' suggesting that the key role of the firm is in creating, storing, and applying knowledge.

It should not entirely be surprising that business and industry have been at the forefront of developing and using knowledge networks to improve performance, and that they have produced many examples of success stories. Toyota, American Express and Siemens are just a few examples of industry leaders (Dyer and Nobeoka, 2000; Davenport and Probst, 2002). The success of Toyota and also Honda Motors has partly been attributed to the fact that they developed bilateral and multilateral knowledge-sharing routines with suppliers that result in superior inter-organizational or network level learning.

This is particularly relevant in new and emerging technology based industry. In the biotechnology industry for example, Powell et al. (1996) found that the locus of innovation was the network, not the individual firm. Patents were typically filed by a large number of individuals working for different organizations, including biotech firms, pharmaceutical companies, and universities. The authors argued that biotech firms who are unable to create (or position themselves in) 'learning networks' are at a competitive disadvantage.

Many development organizations have now started promoting knowledge networks for producing superior development results. International Development Research Centre (IDRC) for example, has been promoting Information and Communications Technology (ICT) applications for Development with the formation of learning networks. The learning opportunity for their growth comes from the experiences across Asia and Latin America where early networks were established. The application from this learning can pay dividends for existing networks that are now in a growth trajectory, or new and emerging ones. The interest in exploring new ways of supporting these networks is growing, but given the competition for resources, it is time to take a systematic look at what is happening, analyze what we are learning about learning, and explore where this could lead us.

Specifically in the field of development evaluation, the last decade has seen an exponential growth of professional networks and organizations. These include national, regional and international learning networks and communities of practice that are taking advantage of the virtual technologies to link-up, learn and communicate. Some of them have shown a rapid growth trajectory, while others have stagnated. Investing and supporting new and

ongoing networks pose a challenge in terms of lack of documentation about long term modalities to inform strategic planning for their successful development. A recent compilation of some of the more successful of these experiences has been documented in an edited volume by Rugh and Segone (2012).

This paper explores the possibilities offered by the Success Case Method (SCM) for better understanding ways of making new and evolving learning networks effective in delivering the desired results.

THE SUCCESS CASE METHOD

The Success Case Method (SCM) was developed by Robert O. Brinkerhoff (2003), and has been used primarily in the for-profit sector to assess how well organizational interventions, (e.g. training method, new work method or capacity development) are working and producing results. It is a quick and simple process that combines analysis of extreme groups with case study and story-telling². Figure 1 illustrates the concept of the basic SCM model. A Success Case study also identifies and explains the contextual factors that differentiate successful from unsuccessful adopters of new initiatives. A recent study, for example, discovered that the factors that explained why some trainees were able to use their new training to accomplish worthwhile results (while others were not) were support from their supervisors, access to certain data bases, and access to training soon after being assigned new business accounts.

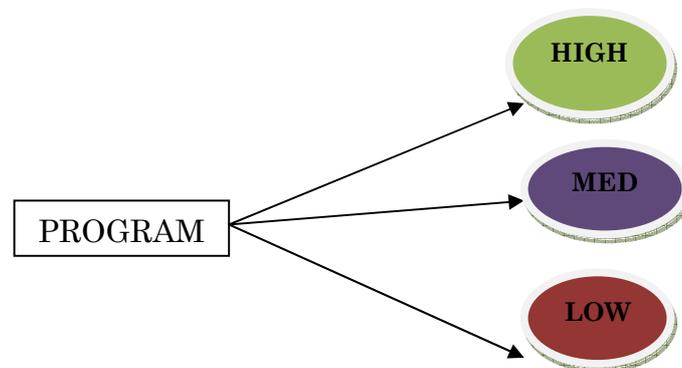


Figure 1: Traditional SCM Model
Source: Coryn et al. (2009)

² A variant of the Success Case Method is the Positive Deviance Approach that can be used in identifying key contributors of success.

The process has two fundamental parts. First, the evaluator identifies the few program participants who were the most, and least, successful – the two extremes in possible outcomes are selected from the total sample, based on ‘success criteria’ that are most of interest in the future development of the enterprise. This usually requires a brief survey of the total sample. Survey respondents are sorted into those few that are most and least successful. Then, one selects a random sample from among the most and least successful and, a more detailed survey conducted on these two groups. This detailed survey “digs deep” into their experience to determine the exact nature and extent of their success. More specifically, the evaluator seeks to discover:

- Exactly what they did, how, when, etc.
- What results they accomplished
- How valuable the results are (e.g., in research outcomes, dollars)
- What environmental factors enabled their results, positive or negative

The results of a Success Case Study are communicated in a qualitative or “story” form³. That is, the evaluator finds the most compelling and descriptive examples of success the program has achieved, then documents these examples in a few brief, but richly detailed stories. Such detailed explanations are more useful in an organizational and learning network setting than a dry quantitative analysis of indicators alone. For example, in an evaluation of the business value of emotional intelligence training at American Express, for example, the study told the story of how six different financial advisors, each in a different situation, had used their training to increase sales, increase customer revenues, and so forth. Comparing these stories with the stories of unsuccessful participants allowed us to pinpoint the several key performance system factors that enabled some to make very successful use of the program, while others were not nearly so successful. As a result, American Express was able to formulate new guidelines for program participation and support that were aimed at increasing the numbers of advisors who could successfully leverage the training into financial results.

The SCM differs from the typical more quantitative methods in that it does not seek to learn about the “average” or modal participant in an initiative. It intentionally seeks the very best that a program is producing, to help determine if the value, a program is capable of producing, is worthwhile, and whether it is likely that it can be leveraged to a greater number of participants. A “success story” is not a testimonial or a critical review. It is a factual and verifiable account – citing evidence that would “stand up in court” – that demonstrates how and how valuably a person used some new method or tool or capability. In the American Express study, for example, the stories

³ The quantitative Positive Deviance study can produce comparisons and results based on quantifiable indicators, and the analysis can produce statistical comparisons of most likely indicators for success. (Kumar-Range et.al. 1996).

of successful advisors cited actual data about their financial results that was verifiable and documented in office records and reports. When necessary, the evaluator seeks corroborating information from third parties, such as peers, customers, or supervisors.

Key elements of the SCM are as follows:

- It looks at only a few cases – so the information is biased and reflects only the most and least successful examples.
- The purpose is specifically to identify what practices contribute to success, so that they can be incorporated into the design of capacity building for others, and to enable a replication of success for others.
- It is not concerned with identifying or studying average performance.
- It is based on solid rules and discipline of scientific inquiry.
- It can be conducted or seen as either a research or an evaluation exercise, but does not need a trained evaluator to do it.

Though the SCM has its main applications in organizational development, it is in many ways similar to Most Significant Change and Appreciative Inquiry evaluation methods – being participatory and relying on internal narratives of success factors. Though primarily qualitative in nature, it can also be adapted to cross-organizational learning of success factors and application of small ‘n’ quantitative methods (White and Daniels, 2012).

The SCM, whether used within a single organizational development situation, or in a comparative evaluative research exercise, eg, with a number of ‘successful organizational cases’, can be considered a rapid approach to identify key parameters contributing to success, and to make a “business case” for improving activities that are currently underachieving across the single or range of situations. However, it is important to also keep in mind the limitations of this method. One limitation is that this method does not relate to the central tendency of success, or methods that produce ‘average’ results, rather those that are at the peak of bottom of performance levels. Another limitation is that the values of single dimension, open ended narratives which can be designed easily, give limited value with this method. Rather a clear analytical basis for reasons for success need to be formulated for a more diverse and discernible data gathering, possibly requiring a two-step process for a sound analysis (Brinkerhoff, 2003). Finally, a challenge that is common to all evaluation studies is to enable the findings to be used in the organizational development processes. Involving the potential users in the study and its data collection, as well as innovative ways of reporting and presenting findings are some of the tools commonly used by evaluators to facilitate with this.

ADAPTING THE SUCCESS CASE METHOD TO THE STUDY OF LEARNING NETWORKS

Adapting the SCM to the study of Learning Networks and Organizations could yield useful insights in building both the individual as well as the organizational level systems. Success criteria identified at each level would be used as criteria for selecting the study sample of successful and unsuccessful cases. Methods for the study, however, need to be suitably adapted to the technological platforms that are used by the Learning Networks. New Media efforts are increasingly important for effective Networks, so clear goals and success criteria can be set for assessing their relevance for effective members and organizations.

Freely available tools such as Google analytics, bit.ly, and Klout can help keep track of users. However, it is vital to combine the above numbers with qualitative data gathered through open ended surveys, as well as other methods such as usability testing, focus groups, and sentiment analysis. Because new media is rapidly emerging and constantly changing, evaluators trying to assess it have to be nimble. They have to keep abreast of emerging new media platforms as well as the analytical tools being developed to assess the effectiveness of these platforms. For instance, with the advent of twitter, new tools such as Twitalyzer, Klout, and GraphEdge emerged to track engagement and influence on twitter. At the core however, is a good understanding of how the new media is expected to contribute to the success parameters of the Learning Network⁴.

In adapting the SCM to Learning Networks, defining success parameters is needed for starters. The meaning of success that is typically associated with SCM studies is linked to the impact of the interventions that the organization is building the capacity for that is being generated by the Learning Network. In business and industry that is commonly measured by return on investment. Although it is possible to construct return on investment or cost-benefit ratios for learning networks, this may not be the most meaningful measure of success in such cases—where success is somewhat removed from

⁴ The following are some free new media analytics tools:

Google Analytics (www.google.com/analytics/): An analytic solution offered by Google that generates statistics on all aspects of web site traffic.

4Q (www.4qsurvey.com/): A survey application that supplements web analytics with actual user feedback.

Klout (<http://klout.com/>): A tool that measures influence on the web using 35 variables on Facebook and Twitter.

Twitalyzer (<http://www.twitalyzer.com/>): An analytics tool that measures impact, engagement and influence on twitter.

the organizational setting, and occurs in the academic, advocacy or policy realm.

In the work of Coryn et al. (2009) where they adapted the SCM to a non-profit program, their definition of success required rethinking and reconceptualizing what is meaningful, not only for the collaborative service providers but also in terms of its recipients and downstream impactees. In essence, the meaning of success in that context was considered across three levels: (a) upstream stakeholders (e.g., program service providers, designers, funders), (b) immediate impactees/consumers (e.g., the program recipients and their families), and (c) downstream impactees/consumers (e.g., the larger community). In order to get more specific details, they sought feedback from these three stakeholder groups.

Incorporating a time series dimension is also relevant for Learning Networks as they transition from the setup stage to maturity and later transitioning to new challenges or possibly obsolescence.

THE STAGES IN THE EVOLUTION OF LEARNING NETWORKS

Etienne Wenger (1998) identified five stages of development in learning networks and communities of practice.

Stage 1: POTENTIAL

At this stage there is a loose network of people with similar issues and needs. People need to find each other, discover common ground and prepare for a community. Relevant initiatives at this stage include:

- An awareness campaign and identifying benefits of practice communities
- Diagnosing organizational issues
- Leading creation of a corporate community development strategy
- Identifying what communities to build
- Helping people find common ground through different forms of group dialogue
- Identifying what learning and impact the community wants
- Coaching community champions

Stage 2: COALESCING

At this stage people come together and launch a community. People find value in engaging in learning activities and design a community. Relevant initiatives at this stage include:

- Facilitating dialogue around identity and joint enterprise
- Designing, facilitating and documenting informal meetings
- Mapping learning flows and relationships
- Designing and creating a community support structure

- Coaching community coordinators, communicators and support staff
- Working with designers of work spaces to improve learning and knowledge sharing
- Building organizational support

Stage 3: MATURING

The community takes charge of its practice and grows. Members set standards, define an expanded learning agenda, and deal with growth. By now they are engaging in joint activities, resource generation, creating outputs, and developing commitment and relationships. Relevant initiatives at this stage could include:

- Guiding a community through growth
- Co-developing supportive strategies for the group learning agenda
- Creating frameworks, guidelines, measures and temperature checks for development
- Designing knowledge capture and documentation systems
- Designing, convening and facilitating conferences
- Working with the community on issues around relationships
- Sharing best practices on community building

Stage 4: ACTIVE

The community is established and goes through cycles of activities. They need ways to sustain energy, renew interest, educate novices, find a voice and gain influence. Initiatives at this stage could include:

- Working with the community on issues around commitment and sustaining energy and resources
- Addressing organizational issues that may be helping or hindering activity
- Linking community learning to individual career development goals
- Helping negotiate the role of the community in organizational decision-making
- Forge linkages with other groups and communities for mutual learning

Stage 5: DISPERSING

The community has outlived its usefulness and people move on. The challenges are about letting go, defining a legacy and keeping in touch. Initiatives at this stage could include:

- Helping people let go to the previous paradigm and generate a new one
- Facilitating story telling
- Preserving artifacts, memorabilia and maintaining history
- Convening reunions

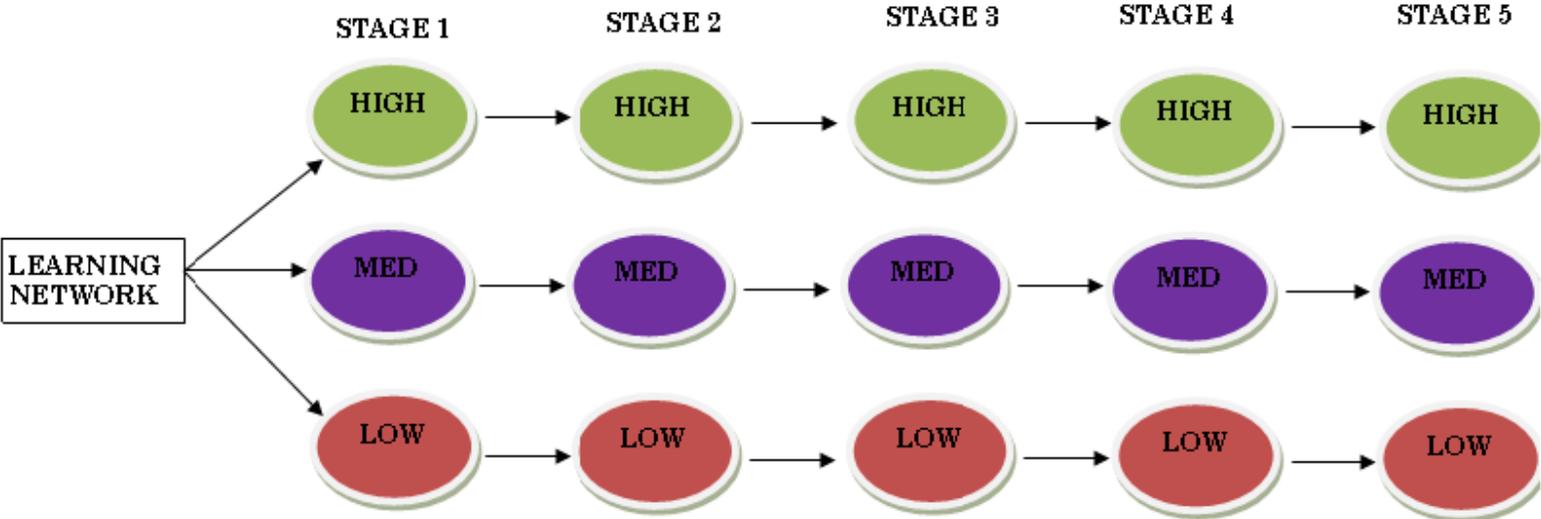


Figure 2: Modification of the SCM Model for a Learning Network

ADDING A TIME SERIES PERSPECTIVE TO THE SUCCESS CASE STUDY

Learning Networks need to progress over time in order to build the participation, learning and resource base for achieving their desired outcomes and impacts. There are characteristics that can be devised to assess its level of functioning and success at each stage of its development. Some networks may not be able to progress beyond a particular stage—which may or may not be what they had intended to achieve. It could be argued that without real impacts on policies and lives of people, the value of a learning network is limited. This parallels role of private sector examples of successful learning networks on productivity and company's bottom line.

Coryn et al. (2009) illustrate how the SCM can be adapted to NGO led social sector activities that generate results over time. Based on this analogy, a system for Learning Networks is shown in Figure 3. The advantages offered by adding a longitudinal, time-series design element to traditional SCM, include: (a) the ability to identify growth (curved, upward turning arrows in Figure 3) and decay (curved, downward turning arrows in Figure 3) and the reasons for them (e.g., delayed manifestation of an effect following a treatment), (b) the ability to identify long-term program effects and for who and why (or why not) those effects are, or are not, sustained, and (c) the ability to provide useful feedback to the program at various points during the evaluation (represented by the feedback loops from Stages 1 to 5).

There are two options for implementing the Modified SCM model that incorporates a time-series perspective. In the case of the NGO development intervention it was set up as a developmental evaluation study incorporating it into a single intervention--in order to identify success factors of individual recipients. This option is also suitable for Learning Networks that build individual or institutional capacity to track results of its members over time. The stages that network members proceed through, for example, in the Young Scholars program of Communication Policy Research (CPR) South, would be spelled out from the point of joining the network, to enabling ICT policy impact.

The second option is to set it up as an ex-post evaluation from a sample of Learning Networks, ranking them for their overall success and conducting a detailed survey of their growth trajectories as compared with those that did not succeed. The second approach gives insights from an organizational development perspective.

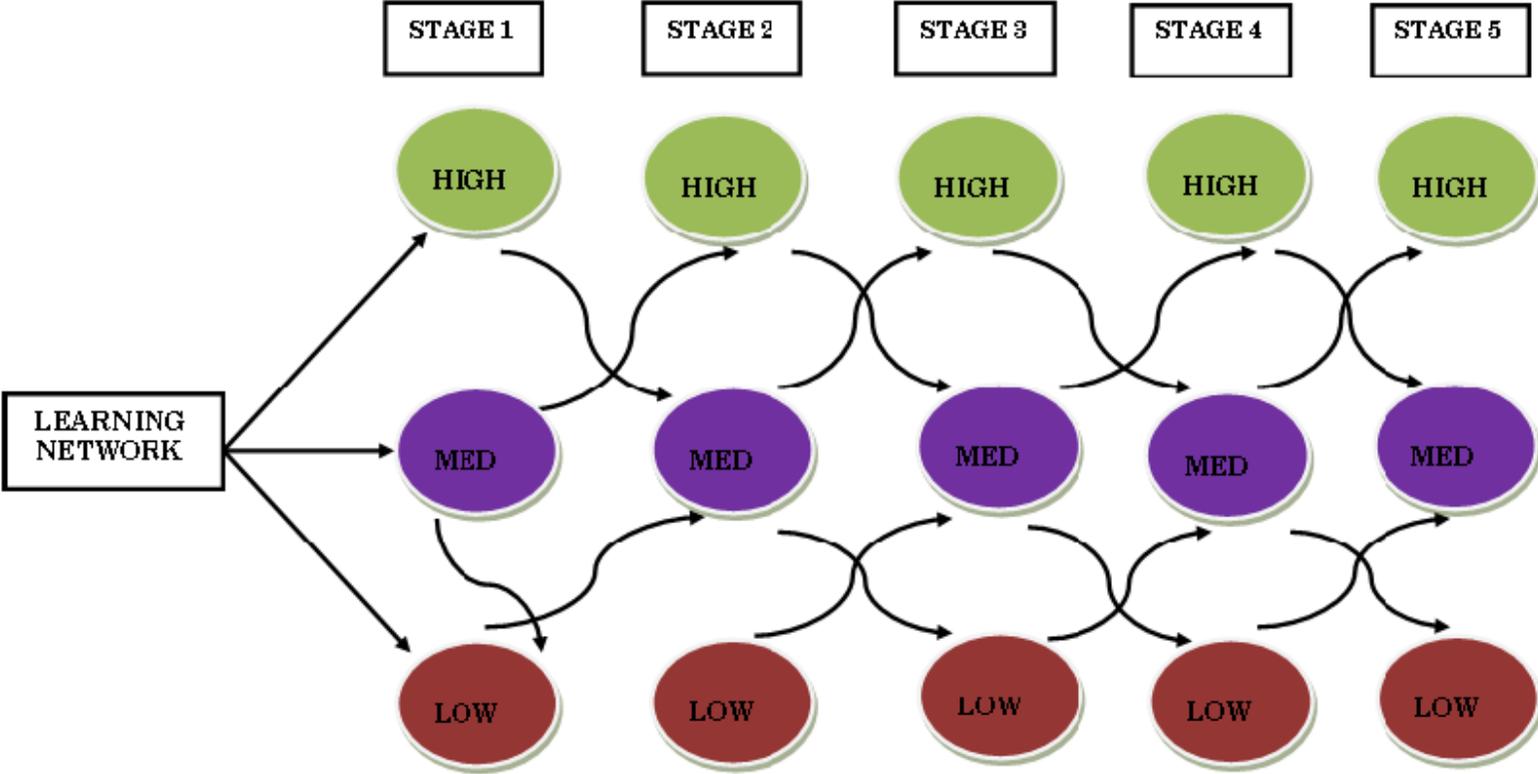


Figure 3: Adding a Time Dimension to the SCM Model for a Learning Network

CONCLUSION

Learning Networks have long been used by business and industry to improve performance. With the growth of virtual media and new learning paradigms this model is rapidly being adopted by development organizations, professionals and scholars that work in new disciplines, such as in Development Evaluation. The potential for learning within and across these learning networks can provide a tremendous opportunity, and their development needs and challenges need to be tracked and monitored to ensure their success. The relatively simple Success Case Method study that is discussed in this paper can provide useful guidance in this.

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