

CompanyCommand: A Peer-to-Peer Learning Forum

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PICTURE FOR A moment that you are a front-line Army leader in combat and you've just taken your first casualty. The emotions are overwhelming and your soldiers are looking to you for guidance and leadership. Where do you turn for the insights you need to lead your organization through this crucible?

With this scenario in mind, consider Stephanie in Iraq, whose unit took its first casualty. The Army has policy, regulations, and doctrine on how to appropriately honor soldiers killed in action. However, what Stephanie really needed was the voice of experience from those who had walked in her shoes.

CompanyCommand is an online peer-to-peer collaborative community of practice for Army company commanders (see Exhibit 45.1). In this forum, junior officers throughout the organization can connect laterally across unit boundaries to share what they are learning, provide advice, and create new knowledge for novel challenges (Dixon, Allen, Burgess, Kilner, & Schweitzer, 2005). The forum was profiled in *Harvard Business Review* as a breakthrough idea in 2006 and continues to offer a powerful approach to building learning communities.

By connecting through the *CompanyCommand* team, Stephanie was rapidly in contact with leaders who themselves had experienced casualties in Iraq and could give her relevant

Exhibit 45.1. Who Are Company Commanders?

Company commanders are Army officers responsible for a unit of approximately 150 soldiers. They are distributed in more than 120 countries globally and are at the level in the organization that strategy is operationalized—in this sense, the Army might have a well-developed strategy that, if not implemented effectively at the company level, will go awry. On the other hand, such strategy could be flawed or incomplete, and yet if these front-line leaders are able to collaborate and adapt on the ground, the organization will be effective. In a civilian context, company commanders would be similar to a construction project manager or manufacturing plant manager.

and sound advice—including how to conduct a meaningful memorial service and sample condolence letters for family members.

Or consider Stan, who deployed to combat expecting to be a staff officer the entire deployment. But when a company commander from his unit was killed in action, Stan's superior directed that he prepare to take charge of the company within days. Through the *CompanyCommand* team, Stan was able to connect with three other leaders who had experienced the same thing—taking command in combat of a unit whose commander had been killed in action. The three officers were able to provide Stan with highly refined and relevant advice based on their practical experience with this situation—including insights on how to help his new unit grieve the loss of its past commander while also getting back in the saddle to conduct its demanding mission.

Rob Cross and Lee Sproull (2004), in their article “More Than an Answer: Information Relationships for Actionable Knowledge,” describe why leaders like Stephanie and Stan often prefer to turn to fellow practitioners first when encountering a challenge, rather than using a knowledge management database or asking a superior officer. The authors found that leaders often need meta-problem solving. In other words, a safe conversation with fellow practitioners can help draw out and unearth the underlying issues. Furthermore, Cross and Sproull found that practitioners often need encouragement and support to take action. Words such as, “Hey, it sounds like you are on the right track. Go for it!” can be empowering for a young leader who already knows the courageous decision she needs to make. In environments that are highly dynamic, like combat, the voices of peers are especially meaningful. In this milieu, learning and adaptation are essential to effectiveness, and traditional hierarchical approaches to learning struggle to keep up with the pace of change. As a result, much expertise and understanding reside at the edges of the enterprise, where practitioners interface with the environment, and not necessarily at the core or top of the organization.

While it would seem ideal for peer-to-peer conversations to be hosted in a face-to-face setting, the reality for a large distributed organization is that one's peers with relevant experience are often miles away. Using online collaborative forums to connect front-line leaders enables them to suspend many of the limitations of location and time, allowing them to rapidly collaborate and learn from each other in meaningful and relevant ways regardless of their location. See Figure 45.1 for a screen shot of the *CompanyCommand* professional forum.

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Figure 45.1. *CompanyCommand* Professional Forum

The screenshot shows the CompanyCommand website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'How to Start???' and 'Contact Us' buttons. The main header includes the site logo and a search bar. Below the header, there's a 'LOGIN' section with fields for 'Username' and 'Password', and a 'Remember my login' checkbox. A 'LOGIN' button is present, along with links for 'Create Account' and 'Login/Password Problems?'. To the right of the login section, there's a 'Visit our Sister Site Platoonleader' link. The main content area features a central announcement: 'A Web site by and for Company Commanders--past, present, and future...[read more]'. Below this, there's a photo of three soldiers in uniform. To the right of the photo, there's a 'CMD Quiz' section with a 'Take Quiz' button. Below the photo, there's a 'New Command Challenge' announcement. Further down, there's a 'Most Recent Discussions' table. The table has four columns: 'Discussion Forum', 'Thread', 'Posts', and 'Last Post @'. The table lists several discussions, including 'Challenges: Open Discussion', 'FRG Leader Resignation', and 'AUG/SEP 2003 C-LL Newsletter (Issue #26): Open Discussion'. On the right side of the page, there's a 'Featured' section with links to newsletters and training tips.

Discussion Forum	Thread	Posts	Last Post @
Challenges: Open Discussion	FRG Leader Resignation	8	2003-12-05 1:40 am
AUG/SEP 2003 C-LL Newsletter (Issue #26): Open Discussion	Cdr/1SG Relationship	1	2003-12-04 8:06 pm

So you might be thinking: “I’m sold. I want this for my organization! But, how do I do this and where do I start?” Following are eight essential insights to get you started on your journey—insights that are drawn from the hard-earned lessons of the *CompanyCommand* experience.

If *They* Build It, They Will Come

One of the critical factors to *CompanyCommand*'s success is that it was developed *by and for* experienced company commanders—not *by* the Army's information technology department *for* commanders. Furthermore, membership is restricted to past, present, and future commanders.

To make something like this happen in your organization, first identify the specific group to focus on—such as project managers or plant managers. It's recommended that you select a practice that is distributed across the enterprise and is critical to organization-wide performance. Then, pull a team of experienced and respected current leaders in that practice into a three-day workshop in which *they* design and populate the collaborative space that *they* would love to use, ensuring that it will add value to their work. As a part of this process, these leaders identify essential areas that members of their practice need to be effective at. For example, within the *CompanyCommand* forum these functions include topics such as war fighting, training, caring for soldiers, and physical fitness. If a company does these

things well, that unit will be effective. These topic areas inform the taxonomy and help to structure the forum's organizing framework. Volunteers then step up to be *topic leads*, who help facilitate and guide content development for specific areas based on their expertise and passion.

Many organizations use the “If *we* build it, they will come” mindset. They establish an IT-supported tool, only to find that no one uses it and it's not sustained over time. However, if front-line leaders design the resource that they themselves would love to use—now that's a different conversation! Apply the principle “If *they* build it, they will come” and you've already increased the chances of forum success a hundredfold. Current practitioners not only bring relevance, grounding the effort in the realities of contemporary practice, but also bring with them their social network of peers from across the organization, who can be recruited to participate and take on active roles within the forum.

Create a Core Team

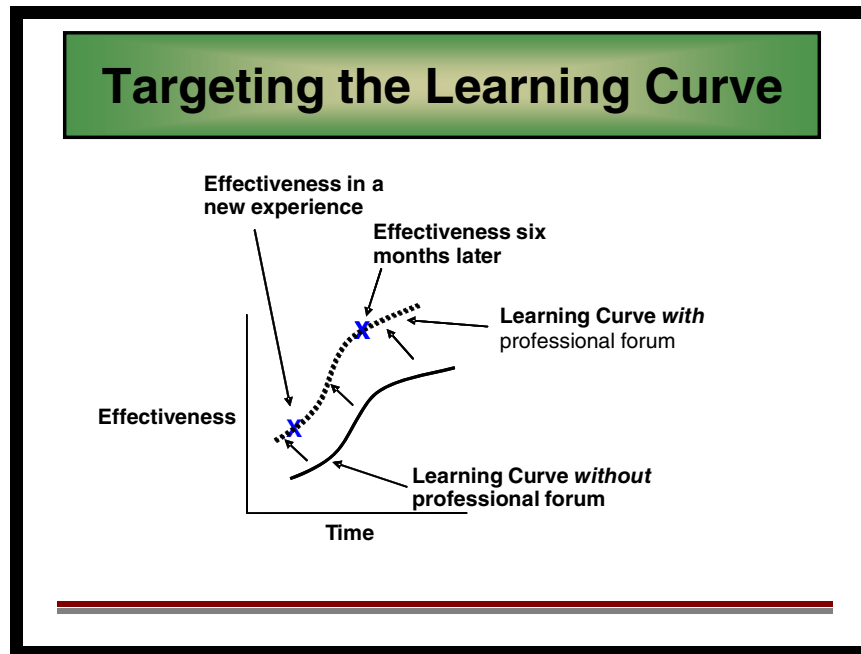
Another essential success factor for the *CompanyCommand* forum is the core team. Among numerous forum development activities, this team provides facilitation, recruits new members, guides technology decisions, and develops learning initiatives for the forum. The core team is comprised of a small full-time staff and a larger network of volunteers. It follows the Red Cross model, in which the full-time staff serves in such a way as to free up the volunteers to add value to the greater community in their area of passion and expertise. For example, managing the budget and operational issues would be more a full-time staff concern, while a volunteer might develop and facilitate a conversation around a topic of personal interest or experience. Additionally, the full-time staff recruits new volunteers on an ongoing basis, enabling the social network, forum conversations and content to stay fresh and alive. Furthermore, the core team conducts an annual face-to-face huddle—called the On Fire Rendezvous—in which new team members are developed and strategic initiatives are identified and resourced for the upcoming year. The *CompanyCommand* experience would advise that at least one member of the full-time team be a rotating member who is pulled in directly out of the field and focuses on recruiting colleagues and keeping the content relevant.

Forum Core Purpose = Practitioner Effectiveness

A forum's core purpose must be centered on effectiveness within the specific practice it is focused on. At the end of the day, if a forum is adding exceptional value to members' on-the-job effectiveness, they will participate (see Figure 45.2).

Everything about the forum experience is looked at through this lens. To illustrate this focus on effectiveness, the *CompanyCommand* team envisions members' learning curves shifting up and to the left as a result of each interaction they have within the forum. For

Figure 45.2. Targeting the Learning Curve



example, a new company commander is at a greater level of effectiveness than he otherwise would be had he not been engaged in the forum. This enables the core team to determine which conversations and content to facilitate in the forum and which opportunities to decline because they hold no relevance for company commander's effectiveness.

Practice the Three Cs of Forum Facilitation: Connection, Conversations, and Content

The user experience within the *CompanyCommand* forum is centered around *connection*, *conversation*, and *content*. Each time members log into the forum they *connect* with like-hearted practitioners who have relevant experiences that relate to their point of concern or interest. They initiate or join meaningful *conversations* that add value to their practice, while also connecting with quality *content* that enables them to do their jobs more effectively.

Let's take Stephanie's situation to illustrate this point. When a leader's unit takes a first-time casualty, she should easily connect in conversation with experienced leaders who themselves have lost a soldier, while at the same time connecting with relevant content that adds value to her point of learning need—in this case, examples or letters of condolence to family members, memorial service ideas, and video interviews with commanders sharing their experiences of dealing with casualties and losing a soldier.

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Focus on Continuously Developing the Three Architectures

Online professional forums have three architectures—*technical, social, and learning*—each of which is necessary but not sufficient on its own. For example, an online forum could leverage the latest eye-watering technology, but without grassroots ownership and a vibrant social movement it won't succeed. Likewise, a non-intuitive, overly complex, or poorly designed user experience will lead to forum failure, no matter how strong the social ties are or how relevant the learning is. Keeping an eye on continuous development of these three architectures will increase the likelihood of long-term forum success. Furthermore, with the technical architecture in mind, the *CompanyCommand* experience would advise use of leading-edge commercial, off-the-shelf forum software rather than an in-house developed solution. This approach will ensure a technology partner who is constantly updating the resource with cutting-edge collaborative technology, while allowing the core team to focus more of its efforts toward the hard work of developing contemporary learning and social architectures—and at the same time keeping an eye on pushing the technology in unique and experimental ways.

Identity Is the Pathway to Vibrant Participation

To engender participation within a forum, foster a sense of professional identity. For instance, let's take medical professionals. People expect their doctors to stay current on the cutting edge of medicine. As doctors come across new learning in their practices, their professional identity demands that they share what they have discovered with the greater medical community at large. This is a powerful construct to have working within any social system—that of taking on the identity of a *professional*—in which members are continually learning and advancing the state of practice. Furthermore, intentionally developing a sense of generalized reciprocity within a community of practice fosters greater participation. In other words, developing a culture in which members express a professional obligation to give back in the same way that they've received—not to the individual who helped them, but to the greater community. With this idea in mind, as new members gain substantial value from the more experienced members of the forum, they are inspired with a vision to *pay it forward generationally* to each successive cohort of leaders coming into the practice. Over time, this is an extraordinary force to have woven through the fabric of any learning community—far more powerful than any type of approach that tries to artificially incentivize people to share their knowledge.

Blend Virtual and Face to Face

A mistake that is sometimes made by efforts like *CompanyCommand* is to think solely in terms of the online space. Experience advises that localized face-to-face gatherings of prac-

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titioners will result in greater participation in their online forum. At the same time, the online experience enriches and broadens the localized venue. With this in mind, the *CompanyCommand* team facilitates huddles called Leader 2 Leader (L2L). These opportunities take various forms and often feature content that has been developed or is emerging from within the forum. Trust and a deeper sense of involvement are developed through L2Ls, thickening the connecting tissue within the community and fostering greater participation and ownership.

Establish a Rhythm

Last but certainly not least, establish a rhythm within a forum; develop a cadence for implementing a portfolio of learning interventions that are conducted on a monthly basis. For a forum to flourish it needs a rhythm of fresh and highly relevant learning injections that members can count on and accommodate in a routine manner. A few examples from the *CompanyCommand* forum include: (1) sending out a monthly forum newsletter that highlights new content and conversations that members are engaged in; (2) facilitating a priority conversation each month that has relevance to all company commanders around a current organizational challenge or opportunity; (3) conducting a video interview with a current company commander that is then featured on the main page of the forum; and (4) sponsoring a reading program in which commanders who desire to read a book with their junior leaders receive the books for free and then participate in a forum conversation about the book.

References

- Cross, R., & Sproull, L. (2004). More than an answer: Information relationships for actionable knowledge. *Organization Science*, 15, 446–462.
- Dixon, N., Allen, N., Burgess, T., Kilner, P., & Schweitzer, S. (2005). *CompanyCommand: Unleashing the power of the Army profession*. West Point, NY: CALDOL.

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