CHAPTER

14

History, Structure, and Practices:
San Pedro Longshoremen
in the Face of Change

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White collar workers increasingly rely on group interaction rather than individual expertise to generate knowledge and create innovative responses to new questions (Becky, 2003). Blue collar workers, in contrast, increasingly work outside the archetypal work gang and operate machinery or computers in isolation from others. As manual labor evolves to require more interaction with machines and less coordination and communication with other workers, highly valued relational aspects of blue-collar work are dwindling. How can positive communities among workers be enhanced while work becomes progressively more asocial?

Many groups of people who share location, interests, or activities are considered communities. An urban neighborhood can be a community; an online forum of deco art enthusiasts can be a community; a group of bikers that ride together on weekends can be a community. Regardless of whether the basis for a community is geographical, conceptual, or behavioral, a community is a positive one when its members actively participate in a network of supportive relationships. This definition assumes that it is the quality of the connection among community members that connotes a positive community. Membership in a positive community enhances the "quality of character of human relationship" (Gusfield, 1975, p. xvi). Attending to the "quality...of relationship" entails a pervasive, intentional, and constructive focus on mutual support and on members as individuals. Positive communities endow the group and its individual members with a primary source of identity, a basis for interpretation, and a channel of influence outside the community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).
If the positive aspects of community remain and even strengthen during “unsettled” (Swidler, 1986) times, membership in the community has the potential to shape new ways in which members think about themselves and one another, their work, their workplaces, and their role in society. Through the community, the changing nature of work can be interpreted, support can be made available, and voice can be solidified and given weight. In this chapter, I focus on the sources of adaptation and flexibility that allow a community to heighten its dominant and positive role in workers’ lives as the world around them changes. I explore a dynamic, positive community during a time of dramatic transformation. This exploration reveals three factors that underlie the strengthening of a positive community when it is confronted with external change: shared history, a densely connected structure of interaction, and regular communication across members.

The theory presented in this chapter is based on my study of the longshoremen1 in San Pedro, California. This community, located on a peninsula incorporated within the city of Los Angeles but 27 miles south of downtown, is home to the largest group of longshoremen residing in one location in the United States. Longshoremen and their families have made up the majority of San Pedro’s population for over half a century. The community among the longshoremen in San Pedro blends the occupational communities discussed by Van Maanen and Barley (1984), the neighborhood communities considered in social capital research (Putnam, 1993) and community psychology (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), and the social worlds described by Strauss (1993). On the job, longshoremen carry out all of the physical and logistical tasks associated with loading and unloading ships. All longshoremen in San Pedro and across the West Coast of the United States are members of the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU). They are employed by more than 70 companies, mostly foreign-owned, connected through the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA). Throughout the second half of the 20th century, the single voice of the ILWU dictated the terms of employment with the loosely tied, diverse set of maritime employers.

In 2002, when I began my interviews and observations, the maritime employers in San Pedro were moving toward broad-scale implementation of information technology on the ports. The longshoremen were facing a fundamental economic and technological transformation of their work after more than 30 years of incremental change (Rosenkopf & Tushman, 1998). Beginning in 1971, longshore work gradually incorporated the many features of

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1Fourteen percent of ILWU members are women. San Pedro is home to three ILWU locals: Local 13, the longshoremen local; Local 63, the clerk local; and Local 94, the foreman local. Foremen, because of their supervisory responsibilities and necessary ties with management, tend to have weak ties with members of the longshoreman community. I use the term longshoremen when referring to registered longshoremen and clerks in San Pedro, regardless of gender.
Interpersonal and collective relationships among longshoremen and the day-to-day interactions between employers and workers slowly altered to accommodate these changes. In the late 1990s, employers initiated small forays into new information technologies for tracking cargo containers as they were moved from ship to port to truck or train. The onset of these changes shook the community awake. San Pedro’s longshoremen braced themselves for “the second revolution of the intermodal transportation industry” (Venieris, 2000). Many felt the imperative to rekindle the community spirit that had been dwindling during the years of incremental change. They believed that renewed unity would help them cope with the new technologies. Using data from observation, interviews, and archival research, I worked iteratively over a 30-month period to develop a grounded understanding of the evolution of community among the workers as they faced the changing environment.

The study of San Pedro’s longshoremen revealed how shared history, shared structure, and shared communication practices allow a community to adapt and increase its focus on mutual support during “unsettled times” (Swidler, 1986). Shared history is perhaps the most prominent feature of the longshoreman community. For more than 150 years, San Pedro has been home to the majority of the men and women who work on the docks of Los Angeles and Long Beach. Every longshoreman in San Pedro knows the stories of those who have come before him. Shared history provides the base, the core that members turn to for identity as individuals and as a group. History recalls the collective actions taken in other unsettled times, and thereby provides a narrative conveying the belief that the community can be powerful and effective in the face of today’s change. Shared structure—the set of relationships among the workers, their employers, the local community, and society—is the flexible backbone of a strong community. Through the myriad links in this network, members hold themselves together in the workplace and in their daily lives outside work (Sewell, 1992). Supported by a foundation of shared history and structure, communities accommodate high uncertainty during periods of upheaval through shared communication practices. Communication practices, the “strategies of action” (Swidler, 1986) that keep the community alive and fluid, offer a daily dose of identity and connection to the workers. Through regular communication across its reach, the positive com-

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2 Until the 1960s, maritime cargo was loaded, transported, and unloaded crate by crate. Once on the docks, crates were moved onto pallets. Forklifts moved the pallets into trucks and warehouses. A standardized, sealed shipping container was invented in the 1950s. In the second half of the 20th century, new shipping systems designed around these large (20, 40, or 45 feet long by 8 feet wide, 8.5 feet high), interchangeable containers drastically increased transport efficiency, allowing the seamless movement of cargo between ships, trucks, and trains. By 2000, approximately 90% of all maritime cargo was shipped in containers.
munity is continually responding to and shaping its own history, its network structure, and its external environment.

**HISTORY: THE BASIS FOR BELIEF IN THE COMMUNITY**

The longshoremen of San Pedro are a throwback to simpler times, days of physical labor and families living and working together. Paradoxically, they are also an exemplar for modern employees, independent workers in a contingent relationship with employers, enjoying generous benefits and job security. Their status rests on an amalgamation of the globalization of trade, the constraints of physical space (you cannot outsource a port), government intervention, competition across employers, and the history of labor in the United States. Stories told in conversation and in writing reinforce the longshoremen's belief in their status, their place in society. The tales include the bloody labor battles of 1934 in which two San Pedro longshoremen were shot and killed during a protest march, the 99-day strike of 1937 that established the union-controlled hiring halls still in operation today, the Modernization and Mechanization agreement of 1960, and the strike of 1971 that opened the door for the technological transformation of the ports. Retelling these stories reminds the longshoremen that their work is important and valued, that their efforts add up to more than a paycheck. It communicates their shared history as well as their shared future.

Bourdieu (1977) offered the concept of *habitus*, the idea that history produces more history through an integration of past experiences into present “perceptions, appreciations, and actions” (p. 82). Events that embody the pervasive, intentional and constructive focus on mutual support within a community are enlarged and reified over years of retelling. The assimilation of workers into the San Pedro community and the socialization into shared values is accomplished through stories of fellow workers of the past, their struggles, and the resolution of those struggles through joint action. Through recounting their shared history, the longshoremen not only define and exert control over their work (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984), they define themselves.

Stories of workers long gone meld multiple affiliations (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). They integrate ties based on territory, work, and shared ideals into a single affiliation with the community of workers. These stories give the workers a reason to coalesce during times of change, by highlighting the ways in which community played a critical role when those who preceded them were faced with similar threats and challenges. Storytelling conveys a place in the larger society even as that place is threatened and altered. Each struggle their predecessors endured is a reason for the long-
shoremen’s unity in the face of current threats; each success their predecessors secured is a source of collective pride today.

Shared history lays the foundation for a positive community when it illuminates the benefits that accumulate from unity. Although history inevitably canonizes its individual heroes, to foster community it needs to also laud the multitude of players, named and unnamed, who contributed to the accomplishments of the whole. A shared history communicates that the group, rather than any one person, has earned the respect of the outside world. To belong to the community is to command that respect, that place in society.

**STRUCTURE: A FOUNDATION OF RELATIONSHIPS**

The San Pedro community exhibits cohesion and structural equivalence (Burt, 1987). Each element of the social structure played a role in reinforcing the positive community as new technologies came into the ports. In San Pedro, social cohesion is to some extent a product of proximity. Longshoremen are relatives of and neighbors to other longshoremen. They interact daily in coffee shops, grocery stores, gyms and restaurants. Proximity and face-to-face interaction, though not necessary for strong communities (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984), reliably lead to community building (Homans, 1961; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Vaughn, 2002). But cohesion is in San Pedro is due to shared preferences for mutual interaction as well as shared location. Many of the longshoremen I met had compelling interests outside work. They were in school, running small businesses, travelling, raising children and engaged in side careers. In spite of these other avenues for interaction, their close friends, the people they chose to be with outside work, were often other longshoremen.

Unlike most employees who work for one employer in one workplace, most longshoremen work for a different employer on a different ship each day.³ This feature of their work has the potential to strain any cohesion among community members. Having experienced the costs of this dispersion early in their history, West Coast longshoremen secured the union-controlled hiring hall. Each person wanting to work on a given day comes to the hiring hall to get his port assignment. The hiring hall decreases the conflict between the administrative control of work (hierarchy, rules and procedures, etc.) and “communal principles of control” (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984, p. 290). For longshoremen, the daily interaction with one another

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³The Mechanization and Modernization Agreement instituted the use of “steadies,” who report to the same pier and employer every day. This has strained the community, but is somewhat mitigated by steadies reporting to the hiring hall for extra work whenever there is insufficient work for them in their steady position.
in the hiring hall, outside the purview of management, affords the community significant influence over the identities and activities of its individual members. The constant rotation of workers at an employer’s pier or ship constrains management’s influence over the longshoremen’s interpretations of new stimuli in the environment. During times of tumult, technological and economic changes are discussed and interpreted in the hiring hall rather than under the roof of the employer.

In addition to strong cohesion, San Pedro’s longshoremen exhibit a notable level of structural equivalence. Because of the hiring hall process for assigning work, every longshoreman is a potential coworker of every other longshoreman. Longshoremen are also structurally equivalent in their relationships with their employers and their work. There are multiple job classifications, ranging from lashers who secure the containers on the ships, to crane operators who operate the huge cranes that move the containers from ship to land and vice versa. After those registered at a certain job classification have taken the jobs they want for the day, other longshoremen can take any job for which they have the required training. This reduces differences in experiences as well as differences in income. Longshoremen are also structurally equivalent relative to local, state and federal government and the public. Viewed from the outside as powerful, unified, and willing to exercise their muscle, one longshoreman is the same as another and they are all separate and different from the mainstream. Accepting employment as a longshoreman means taking on the larger role in society as well.

Shared structure forms the relational foundation for a community of workers. Physical proximity, preferences for within-community interaction, and structural equivalence provide consistent reinforcement of meaning through complementary messages across relationships and activities (Small & Suppie, 2001). Increasing interpersonal cohesion boosts trust (Jehn & Shah, 1997; McGinn & Keros, 2003) and enhances attraction among group members (Zaccaro & Lowe, 1988). Cohesion and structural equivalence lead to a convergence in emotions (Anderson, Keltner, & John, 2003) and a common way of making sense of the issues faced by the community (Fletcher & Fitness, 1996; Wegner, Erber, & Raymond, 1991). These shared emotions and cognitions further enhance the sense of connection and belonging among members. As with shared history, shared structure encourages a collective response to environmental change.

COMMUNICATION PRACTICES:
KEEPING THE COMMUNITY FLUID

Among San Pedro’s longshoremen, face-to-face communication in the hiring hall allows the development of a common language supporting the goals and ideals of the community of workers (Bechky, 2003). As the language is
spoken, work takes on a meaning beyond the task. Longshoremen have
developed a language of safety (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984), economics and
unity that identifies and solidifies their community. The language of safety,
economics, and unity is spoken in the hiring halls and on the docks, as well
as during casual social interactions among longshoremen. Talk of safety
and economics ties the community together, exposes members of the
community as members, and helps the longshoremen interpret changing cir-
cumstances. Talk of unity emphasizes that the collective is valued, active,
real, and that the power of the collective serves its members even in the
face of change or challenge. This language shapes the members’ responses
to and understandings of the changes surrounding them.

Safety has been essential to the culture of longshoremen since they first
started loading and unloading ships. Their jobs are objectively dangerous,
with a fatality rate of 16.6 per 100,000 in 2003, putting longshoremen into the
second most dangerous occupational group and industry in the United
States. Although the tasks carried out by a longshoreman fundamentally
changed with the introduction of containerization, fatality and injury levels
remained high. The number of recent deaths and the details of the latest in-
juries are a common topic in hiring hall conversations. But talk of safety
conveys more than high injury rates; it expresses the physical, masculine
identity of individual longshoremen and of the community of longshore-
men. Longshoremen pride themselves on masculinity, but most of their
jobs no longer involve strenuous physical labor. The ideals of masculinity
and physicality are kept in the collective conscience through a constant dis-
cussion of safety and an ongoing litany of the dangers of longshore work.
When the employers proposed new technological changes, the longshore-
men translated the proposition into a question of safety. It was that transla-
tion that was offered to the public, thus shaping the negotiations with em-
ployers.

Talk of economics is heard throughout the hiring hall and on the docks.
Longshoremen incessantly discuss how much they make per hour, how
much more one job pays over another, and how much they earned last
week, last month, and last year. There are repeated references to their role
in the larger economy, the value of the goods passing through the ports
each month, and the critical place they hold in international commerce.
Longshoremen are among the best paid laborers in America (Kanter, 1999).
A Class A longshoreman working 40 hours per week, 50 weeks per year,
earns more than $100,000. Clerks, crane operators, and those who choose to
work overtime can earn significantly more. Longshoremen communicate in-

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4In terms of dangerous occupational groups, longshoremen are second only to agricultural
workers, which include fishermen, farmers, and loggers. In terms of industry fatalities, the con-
struction industry ranks number one.
ternally and externally that their key position in international trade justifies their high pay. Employers, seeking to impose technological changes, waged a campaign to raise public and governmental awareness of the millions of dollars in daily costs incurred during work slowdowns on the ports. The employers’ efforts only served to increase the longshoremen’s security about their critical role in the economy. While any one longshoreman spends his days performing the tedious tasks required for loading and unloading ships, talk of economics says that longshoremen together keep the national and international economy moving.

Unity among longshoremen is summed up in ILWU’s motto, “An injury to one is an injury to all.” This message is conveyed through banners in the hiring hall, on the locals’ newspapers’ letterhead, on the locals’ Web sites, and in speeches made by local and international officers. Members are “brothers and sisters.” Whether waiting in the hiring hall for work (the best jobs each day go to the longshoremen who have worked the fewest hours that month), discussing employer treatment (favoritism is strongly frowned upon even if it benefits a member), or making contributions to other unions (San Pedro families “adopt” and support families in other worker communities during work stoppages), the mantra of unity and solidarity is reinforced. As conversations around the new technologies take place in the hiring hall and on the docks, the longshoremen’s responses are voiced in the language of unity—we will accept the changes only if the work is kept within the community and all are trained in the new systems.

The language of safety, economics, and unity underlies external as well as internal communication practices. During a time of upheaval, a positive community shapes its external message in a way that draws public attention to the impact of the change on the community. This is accomplished by translating the conditions facing the community into the community’s language, rather than allowing external players to drive public understanding of those conditions (Checkoway, 1995). When new technologies first emerged on the docks, the longshoremen’s first response was outright rejection. Some employers continued with implementation, creating the impetus for the longshoreman community to develop a shared understanding and response. Their shared history and structure shaped the contours of this response. History showed the futility of fighting implementation over the long run; cohesion ensured that the community would not be willing to trade clerk jobs (which would gradually be eliminated through the use of new information technologies) for more longshoreman work (which would increase as volume and turnover increased in response to more efficient information technologies); and structural equivalence dictated that any new technology would have to be understood and accepted by all if it were to be effectively used on the ports. The longshoremen’s response was communicated to the employers and the public through the shared language of
safety, economics, and unity. The changes would be welcomed by the long-shoremen as long as they did not further threaten the safety of the workers, the additional profits from the new efficiencies were shared with the workers, and those in jobs most affected by the new technologies would continue to be able to earn the same wages as others in the community.

Social worlds are built and linked to the larger society through communication practices (Strauss, 1993). The influence a positive community has on members during a time of discontinuous change comes not only through shared history and structure, but also through the interactions taking place in the community during upheaval. Communication practices include day-to-day interactions among community members. They also include the messages exchanged with parties external to the community, either explicitly through the media or other outlets, or implicitly through the outsiders' observations of community members. Communication, whether internal or external, informal or formal, establishes the tone and the details of the community's response to new technologies (Bechky, 2003). When confronted with change, communities respond in ways that are congruent with their history and structure (Kelley & Steed, 2004). Communication, improvised in the moment, acts as the avenue for rapid adaptation (Turner, 1991). This fluidity enabled by communication and steeped in history and structure gives positive communities the potential for shaping both the change itself and the community's response to that change.

Like structure, which provides a snapshot of a community at a specific point in time but is continuously evolving, communication practices mirror the realities of the present while adapting to environmental shifts. Like history, which embodies the meaning behind membership, communication practices encourage visible and visceral statements of the values of membership. Communication practices offer constant reminders of what the community stands for, who its members are, and what members are expected to do and believe in the face of change.

CONCLUSION

A positive community enhances the "quality of character of human relationship" (Gusfield, 1975, p. xvi) across its members. This enhancement is revealed in a pervasive, intentional and constructive focus on mutual support and on members as individuals as well as contributing parts of the group. As the chapters across this volume illustrate, a positive community of workers is a tangible, vital, influential force in the workplace. When confronted with changes largely out of their control, community may become more central to the identity, interpretation, and influence of traditional workers. A critical question is how positive communities can grow and thrive in
changing work environments, when workers are especially in need of mutual support and understanding. This chapter has attempted to begin to address that question.

Blatt and Camden (chap. 13, this volume) suggest that in "settled" times, mutual support may be self-reinforcing, fed by the daily interactions among community members. Maintaining a positive community in settled times may not require much beyond simple, mutually beneficial communication. During "unsettled" times, however, these actions may be insufficient. The example of San Pedro's longshoremen suggests that three features interact to strengthen a positive community among workers during times of radical change: shared history, shared structure, and shared communication practices. A shared history offers a belief system carved out of the realities of the past—it illuminates the continuities that govern mutual support within the community. Shared structure, which reproduces quality connections among community members during stable times, binds the community together when external changes are pulling its members in different ways. Shared communication practices foster a mutually developed basis for translation and interpretation of the new circumstances confronting the community.

Through shared history, shared structure, and shared communication practices, positive communities of workers endow the group and its individual members with identity, a lens for interpretation, and a channel of external influence in a changing world. History cannot be changed, but interpretation of history can. Structure and communication are constantly in a state of flux. Future research can help us understand the dynamic processes within positive communities that allow historical interpretations, social structure, and communication practices to evolve while ensuring continued mutual support to members during times of change.

REFERENCES


