

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Communities of practice (CoPs) 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.”¹ Other terms for communities of practice include “learning collaboratives,” “peer consultation networks,” and “professional learning communities.”

Most often a CoP is a group of practitioners separated geographically who interact via web spaces, forums, email lists, webinars, conference calls, or other forms of distance communication. Some communities of practice also hold in-person meetings or activities. Although distance communication technology is a key feature of most communities of practice, it is important to remember that the power is in the community, not the technology.

The CoP model is based on two theories that align well with the needs of adult learners:

- *Social learning theory*, which posits that learning results from the varied perspectives and experiences of members of a group as they identify shared issues and work toward common goals
- *Situated learning theory*, which is centered on the idea that optimal learning takes place within the context of real situations

Guidelines for Forming and Strengthening Communities of Practice

Communities of practice require a great deal of behind-the-scenes orchestration. The following strategies can help build and strengthen a successful community of practice.

Identify or recruit core members

- Recruit members willing to co-lead and serve as ambassadors for the community.
- Look for people who are extremely engaged, credible, and community oriented (these may be people you already know or people you notice in a meeting or when interacting online).

¹ Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4

- Part of the role of the facilitators of a community of practice is to create sustainability by continually working to identify and support members who can take on leadership roles.

Establish a collective identity and clear purpose

- Identify common interests, needs, and concerns through a well-designed needs assessment process.
- Come to agreement about group goals and state them clearly and publicly.
- Ensure that members understand how they can contribute and how the CoP relates to their daily work.
- Work with members to determine whether the group will be public, private, or a mix (e.g., a private online forum with some public online meetings or presentations).

Provide a range of opportunities for participating at varying levels

- Opportunities for participation include:
 - Synchronous events (e.g., webinars, face-to-face meetings, conference calls).
 - Moderated asynchronous interactions (e.g., forums, email lists, resource sharing, social media).
 - Mentorship opportunities, both formal (two members are paired up by a facilitator) and informal (members spontaneously connect to share advice). See the [Mentoring Factsheet](#).
 - Group problem solving (e.g., members each bring a problem on which to receive feedback from the group, or the group focuses on a problem common to most or all members).
- Be realistic when planning the activities of the CoP so it is sustainable for moderators and logical and doable for participants.
- Accept that CoP members will participate at different levels, ranging from simply reading and observing to active participation and leadership. Valuing multiple levels of participation can build a larger, more diverse, and potentially more sustainable community.

Provide ongoing leadership, facilitation, and moderation

- Encourage members to participate, interact, and stay involved (this includes privately reaching out to individual members).

- Share leadership (this builds individual members' skills and provides a foundation for sustaining the CoP).
- Identify and highlight the expertise of individual members (e.g., ask members to post detailed online profiles).
- Seed discussions to build participation. For example:
 - Share a resource that you know will be useful to the group and provide discussion questions eliciting members' opinions.
 - Privately reach out to a member you know is looking for specific information or advice and assist him or her in posting a question for the community at large.

Provide clear guidelines and information

- Provide information and assistance (e.g., guides, tutorials, personalized help) related to the CoP's technology (e.g., web conferencing, online spaces).
- Create resource sharing guidelines (e.g., how to share electronically, avoiding copyright violations, crediting original sources).
- Create guidelines for how forums and other group spaces will be moderated.
- Inform members about group norms, etiquette, and privacy considerations (e.g., FERPA).

Maintain a welcoming atmosphere where social interaction is encouraged

- Ensure that all forum posts and group emails receive responses.
- Show appreciation (e.g., after a person posts to a forum a number of times, send an email saying, "Thanks for participating!"). The more people feel valued and important, the more they will want to participate.
- Highlight members' contributions to the group, as well as their outside achievements.

Conduct periodic evaluations and respond accordingly

- Assess the group's progress toward goals.
- Monitor the community's level of engagement (e.g., via web analytics if available) as well as subjectively assessing the quality of interactions.
- Conduct community needs assessments.
- Make changes to the group's structure, processes, and activities in response to needs assessment and evaluation results.

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