Communities of Practice Guide

Creating, reinvigorating or transforming a community of practice.

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Community of Practice (CoP) Network

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In this Guide:

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What are Communities of Practice (CoPs)?

CoPs are "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Not everything called a "community" is a community of practice. For example, a neighborhood may be considered a community, but not necessarily a community of practice. Book club members may all enjoy reading novels, but they do not share a practice that expands the field of literature or addresses literacy. Three elements are key:

COMMUNITY members "engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).
DOMAIN is "shared domain of interest" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015), "a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).
PRACTICE is a "shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Why are CoPs useful?

Communities of practice (CoPs) connect people with common goals and interests for the purpose of sharing resources, strategies, innovations and support. CoPs support the transmission and expansion of knowledge and expertise for leaders, learners and professionals in any field or discipline. CoPs contribute to a more connected and collaborative global community in your field of expertise.

What can this Strategy Guide do for you?

Whether you already have an active CoP or you are just starting out, the tools provided on this site are designed to help you consider your CoP vision, goals and strategies.

Based on your responses to these questions, identify areas of improvement and create a list of goals. What do you need more of? Less of? How will you achieve these goals?

Involve members of your group

CoPs are communities, first and foremost. We recommend that CoP reflection and planning occur with as many CoP members as possible. The more group member involvement, the more successful the CoP. This guide can be sent to CoP members ahead of a CoP annual review meeting, for example, and discussed at the meeting.

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The 5 Phases of CoPs

The Cycle of a CoP

The phases of CoPs are more cyclical than linear, so it is helpful to consider all of the phases whether your group is more novice or veteran. For example, even though "define" is phase #1, it will be beneficial for your CoP to continue to check-in with its definition. If just starting out, it might be helpful to consider the "transform" phase to ensure your CoP is adaptive to changes in funding or goals.

The Phases are Flexible

The phases are meant to be flexible. Phases can be skipped or repeated based on your CoP needs. If you don't know what you need, then it may help to review all of the phases.

The Life Cycle of a CoP

#1 Define
#2 Design
#3 Grow
#4 Perform
#5 Transform

Phase 1: Define your CoP

Whether just starting a CoP or reenergizing an existing CoP, it helps to start with a definition. The definition of your CoP will steer every major decision you make for and regarding your community. In some ways it is like a vision or mission statement. The action steps below will help you define your CoP. Remember – it may be best to reflect and plan as a group.

Phase 2: Design your CoP

Once you have a clear sense of identity, it's time for your CoP to get busy. It is important that members of your CoP engage with one another in some meaningful way to swap stories, resources, and expertise. Your CoP design will determine member commitment and overall culture of your community.

Phase 3: Grow your CoP

By this phase you already have a general sense of who your CoP members are, the overall vision and purpose of your CoP and you have designed some activities and modes of communication. Now that there is a general sense of rhythm, it's time to consider expanding!

Phase 4: Let your CoP Perform

Maybe you have just started your CoP – you've had a few meetings and you are working on building a website. Or maybe your CoP meets regularly and you see room for greater impact for both members and the public. How can you create and sustain a cycle of participation and contribution?

Phase 5: Transform your CoP

Perhaps you have enjoyed the fruits of your CoP design & growth processes. Maybe you are meeting regularly with substantial involvement. Suddenly, a key stakeholder or resource is removed – how can your CoP adapt to new circumstances? Does your CoP need to change? Or is it time to consider retiring your CoP?
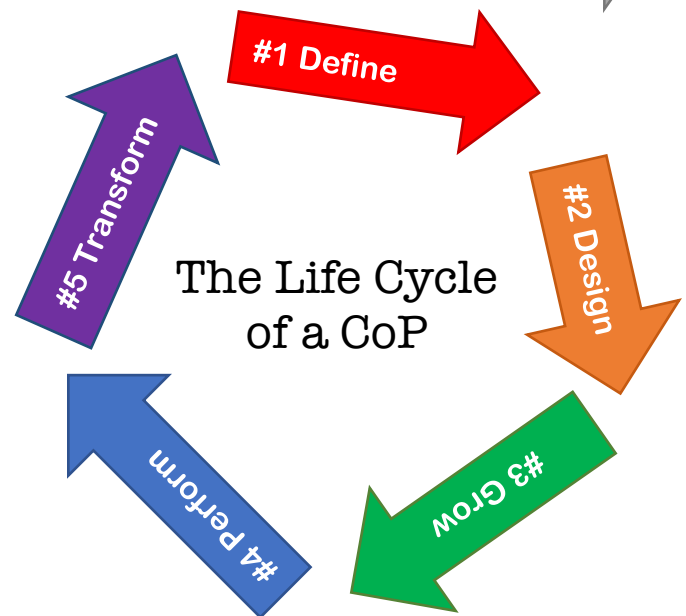
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Worksheets

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Define your purpose

Without clear purpose, people will have other, better defined priorities for their time and energy. People need to clarify what they are passionate about, where they need assistance, and where they have things to share. Consider researching how to write an organizational charter or mission statement as a guide for this process.

- What is your group's primary purpose?
- What specific needs will the community be organized to meet?
- What are the benefits to group members and stakeholders?

Notes:

Define your shared interest

Trekkies, Preschool teachers, small business owners, unicyclists – these can all be CoPs with the right level of action and engagement. CoPs are not just a network of people or a group of friends, but a group that shares both an interest and a commitment to that interest

- What is your group's shared interest?

Notes:

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Define your community

Without people and relationships, there is no community. Community members engage with one another, help each other and learn from one another. While CoPs typically begin organically, key stakeholders may emerge to lead or fund CoP activities. For example, a person may notice the need for a CoP, invite others to participate and find that 5 years later the CoP hosts an annual conference. That original person may label themselves "founder & CEO" of the CoP. CoPs might also benefit from paid administrators, especially if website management or meeting spaces are needed.

- Who are members of your group?
- Does your group have important stakeholders (i.e. funding or leadership roles)?
- How will community roles be defined (individuals, groups, group leaders, community administrators, etc.) and who will take them on?

Notes:

Define your practice

Community members are practitioners engaged in practice. Practice can range from practicing an instrument to teaching a certain topic or age group, to research to advising to management. Within a CoP, members swap stories, resources, and expertise. Members often use a common language surrounding the shared practice.

- What is your shared practice?

Notes:

In a nutshell, CoPs are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.

—Etienne Wenger

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Once you have a clear sense of identity, it's time for your CoP to get busy. It is important that members of your CoP engage with one another is some meaningful way to swap stories, resources, and expertise. Your CoP design will determine member commitment and overall culture of your community. The action steps below will help you design your CoP. Remember – it may be best to reflect and plan as a group.

Design Activities

CoPs are alive and active. CoP activities help establish a shared community identity. Activities may include weekly coffee talks, producing a newsletter, biannual online seminar, etc. Some CoPs are productive and content with fewer meetings and adding more meetings might hurt member retention. Some CoPs find that monthly meetings keep the energy flowing. If applicable, member recognition or awards might help boost energy and excitement.

- What kinds of activities will generate energy and support the emergence of community presence?
- What kinds of interactions (with each other and with the content of the community) will generate energy and engagement?
- Can you award members for outstanding contributions to your shared domain? Or award them for service to the CoP?

Notes:

Because communities of practice are organic, designing them is more a matter of shepherding their evolution than creating them from scratch

—Cultivating Communities of Practice

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Design CoP Communication & Shared Resources

Your group is full of knowledge. That's why you are a CoP (or an aspiring CoP) – your members all specialize in the same domain through practice. Some CoPs benefit from online knowledge bases. Other CoPs generate journals or newsletters. Collaboration might be a key part of your CoP design. Perhaps CoP members share the same research interests and regularly team up on new, innovative studies

- How will members communicate on an ongoing basis to accomplish the community's primary purpose?
- How will community members collaborate with each other to achieve shared goals?
- What are the external resources (people, publications, reports, etc.) that will support the community during its initial development?
- How will members share these resources and gain access to them?

Notes:

CoP Stories (Design)

This story is adapted from Cultivating communities of practice: a guide to managing knowledge (Wenger, 2002). A CoP of librarians held an annual conference and introduced a shared website with an online discussion forum. During and shortly after the conference, members contributed questions and generated responses for one another. It was an active, vibrant online space for sharing. A few months later there was very little activity on in the online forum. Meanwhile, a community of engineers saw their online forum maintain small bursts of activity year-round. The engineers host weekly online sessions instead of an annual conference, so each week their members would read and post on the forum.

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PHASE #3: Grow

By this phase you already have a general sense of who your CoP members are, the overall vision and purpose of your CoP and you have designed some activities and modes of communication. Now that there is a general sense of rhythm, it's time to consider expanding!

Grow your community culture

Before thinking too much about expansion, you may want to consider what it is you are expanding.
- What is your CoP culture? The tone?
- Which members are engaged in the activities and communications that have been designed? How are they engaged?
- How are your CoP members viewed by non-members?

 Notes:

Grow your CoP Brand

Given your response to the questions above, it may be helpful to consider a CoP brand/image. No matter how large or small your group, any group will benefit from a professional name or logo. It will strengthen the presence of your group both internally and to an external audience. Remember, if you are in a thriving CoP, this can be added to your resume or C.V. A brand or image will help legitimize your group to the general public. Creating a brand or image will communicate both your CoP vision to your audience (non-members) and help establish a shared identity/purpose for your CoP members.
- Are members of your group fun/playful/energetic? Or are your shared interests more serious?
- How does your brand/image share this?

Notes:

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PHASE #3: Grow

Grow your CoP membership

Now that you're thinking about a brand/image for your CoP, consider who you'd like to recruit using this brand/image.

- How will potential members learn about your CoP?
- What would you like them to know about your CoP?
- How do new members join? Become oriented?
- How do new members move into leadership roles?

Smaller groups may want to use word-of-mouth to expand, or perhaps post flyers in areas where you think potential new members may spend their time (bulletin boards, elevators, etc.). Larger groups may want to post advertisements in journals or magazines of similar or tangential topics. Don't forget, once new members join, you will want to engage them right away in activities and communications. How do they learn what it means to be a member? How do they learn about potential leadership roles in your CoP?

Notes:

Like a local neighborhood, dynamic communities are rich with connections that happen both in the public places of the community and the private space of community members

—Cultivating Communities of Practice

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Maybe you have just started your CoP – you've had a few meetings and you are working on building a website. Or maybe your CoP meets biannually and you see room for greater impact for both members and the public. How can you create and sustain a cycle of participation and contribution?

Perform with rhythm

Your group activities and engagement should generate a unique and interesting rhythm (Cultivating communities of practice: a guide to managing knowledge). For example: perhaps the heavy downbeat of an annual conference is accompanied by syncopated seasonal luncheons and sprinkled with monthly newsletters and weekly coffee talks. A mix of formal and informal beats keep members energized and engaged. Your rhythm will change as your CoP evolves and that's okay. Let the music play.

- What kinds of community activities will generate energy and engagement and support the emergence of community "presence" (activities, communication, interaction, learning, knowledge sharing, collaboration, roles and social structures)?
- What is the emerging cycle of events/activities in your CoP?
- What are the ongoing community processes and practices that will contribute to the liveliness and dynamism of the community and keep members engaged?
- What are the emerging cultural elements of your community? And how should these elements be recognized within your brand/communication/activities?

Notes:

Performing CoP members

Being a member of a CoP is voluntary, thus strong CoPs attract and retain members with vibrant activities and meaningful contribution. Opportunities to contribute and collaborate will give members a sense of engagement and responsibility. This is a balancing act, however, because overloading member activities may decrease retention.

- What are the emerging roles or subgroups within your group? How are these filled?
- What work products can members contribute to support individual and community goals?

Notes:

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PHASE #4: Perform

Performing benefits

Because being a member of a CoP is voluntary, many successful CoPs provide recognition and benefits for members. Consider spotlighting CoP members in monthly newsletters or giving an annual MVP award for outstanding service or contributions. These awards can extend to non-members as well, which may be a way to demonstrate to your external audience the value of your CoP. For example, if your CoP shares an interest in effective online communication, you may want to recognize the creator of a new online communication tool.

Your group may also want to (or be required to) demonstrate a return on investment for key stakeholders or funding sources. Consider early and often how and when your group will demonstrate benefits and outcomes. Consider generating annual reports including descriptions of members, activities, goals and achievements. Include a copy of your CoP charter.
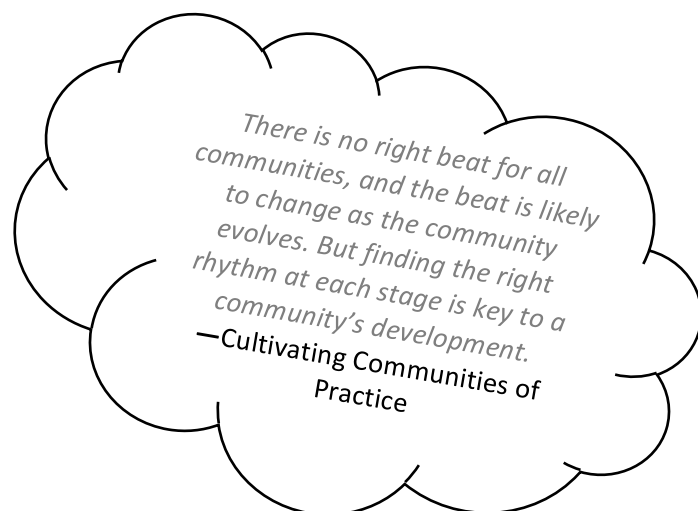
- How do members get recognized and rewarded for their contributions?
- What are the emerging benefits of the community for members, subgroups, the community as-a-whole, the community's sponsors, and other key stakeholders?
- How does the community demonstrate return on investment (ROI) for its sponsor(s)? Members?

Notes:

CoP Stories (Perform)

The CPO Staff & Outreach Network has taken on a key role in the Chancellor's Campus Outreach Awards. This is a great venue to both recognize members' efforts and those of community partners, and it reinforces the importance of the group's mission to campus leadership.

CoP Evaluation Report examined the benefits of seven CoP's sponsored by the Office of Human Resource Development in 2015. The results not only celebrated these seven groups, but also offered ways to measure effectiveness of other campus CoP's.

> *There is no right beat for all communities, and the beat is likely to change as the community evolves. But finding the right rhythm at each stage is key to a community's development.*
> —Cultivating Communities of Practice

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PHASE #5: Transform

Perhaps you have enjoyed the fruits of your CoP design & growth processes, but the initial reasons for meeting together have changed. Maybe you are meeting regularly with substantial involvement. Suddenly, a key stakeholder or resource is removed – how can your CoP adapt to new circumstances? Does your CoP need to change? Or is it time to consider retiring your CoP?

Transform members

In thinking ahead to sustainability, a CoP should create a plan for cycling members in and out of both the community and the community leadership roles. Be sure your group reflects on who, how and when it would like to recruit new members. If there are leadership roles, consider who, how and when new leaders will be selected. Planning ahead is essential for sustainability.

- How do members the join, participate, lead and exit the community?
- How are new potential community leaders (official and unofficial) going to be identified, chosen, developed, and supported by the community?

Notes:

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Transform your purpose

Your CoP may want to conduct focus groups, interview, surveys or other data collection activities to determine you have been successful. Your definition of success is unique to your group, so you will need to consider what success means. As your group grows and changes, your definition of success might change. That is why it is important to return to the elements of the CoP cycle repeatedly over time.

- To what extent is the community serving its intended audience and accomplishing its stated purpose and goals?
- How is success measured?
- How might it do a better job?

Notes:

The Cycle of a CoP

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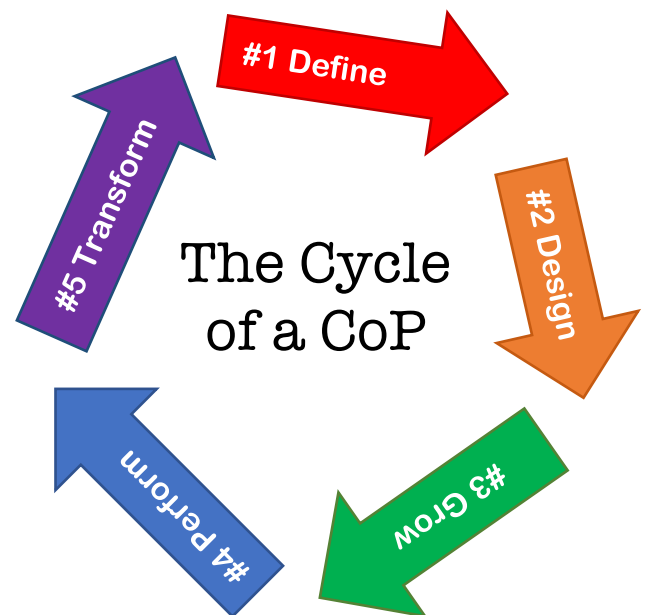
CoP Story (Transform)

Focus on Facilitation Learning Community realized that many interested participants could not personally attend meetings. They created a call-in approach, coupled with recording the meetings, so all could continue to be involved remotely. This also has allowed some to facilitate meetings from afar. In 2017, it now looks like the group may significantly move in the direction of virtual meetings to support their evolving membership needs.

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References

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Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. (2002). Cultivating communities of practice. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.