

## Establishing Communities of Practice

### Q. What are Communities of Practice, and how can we cultivate them to achieve greater impact?

**A.** When you have a question about how to do something, you may be lucky enough to have an "expert," coach, professor or advisor to consult, or you might take the time to research existing documents. But more likely you turn to people who are working in a similar situation, who have dealt with the same question and may already be part of an informal network—a colleague, office mate or friend. Such small groups of people drawn together repeatedly for a shared purpose and with the means to seek, learn and share relevant knowledge are considered a *community of practice* (CoP). According to Etienne Wenger, author and pioneer of CoP research, "Communities of practice 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... [They] are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems...a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope."

### Why Are Communities of Practice Valuable?

Communities of practice are not new. People have gathered to share ideas and develop their skills for centuries. So what makes them more relevant today? Challenged by increasingly complex global problems, leading international development agencies are discovering the vital role knowledge plays in increasing impact. And while there is growing agreement that knowledge is critical for improving aid effectiveness, organizing proactively and systematically to leverage knowledge remains a big challenge.

Over the last decade many organizations have realized through trial and error that technology and formally structured document repositories are not enough. With hard learned lessons about the social nature of knowledge, establishing CoPs has emerged as a vital component of an effective knowledge management strategy. CoPs provide a fresh approach focused on people and the social structures that enable them to learn with and from each other.

Communities of practice are particularly useful in their ability to adapt to meet diverse needs and contexts. CoPs can span institutional structures and hierarchies; they can work across thematic sectors and geographic boundaries. They range from being unrecognized and virtually invisible to being institutionalized and highly visible. They can be purely online or in-person, spontaneous or intentionally planned.

Examples of CoPs are found in many organizations and have been called by different names at various times. Hewlett-Packard Company called them "learning communities", Xerox Corporation labeled them "family groups", the World Bank referred to them as "thematic groups" and IBM Global Services used the term "knowledge networks." Despite the diversity of terms, these groups remain similar in general intent.<sup>1</sup>

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Etienne Wenger

### Case Study: Improving Forest Fire Management in Mexico

Around the turn of this century, Mexico suffered some of the worst forest fire seasons in its history. In response, several Mexican institutions in collaboration with the U.S. Forest Service and USAID launched a fire management and restoration initiative. The Mexican fire management community of practice (CAMAFU) was started in 2002 to strengthen the capacity of participating organizations and the impact of the initiative. CAMAFU was one of several CoPs which were embedded within the broader Mexican Conservation Learning Network.<sup>3</sup>

CAMAFU benefited from a clearly defined purpose within the domain of Mexican forest fire management. It evolved over the years in size and in its focus on specific practices. The CoP cultivated a diverse membership of approximately 32 organizations and 236 individuals, combining participants from national agencies, NGOs and local communities.

One of the big strengths of this CoP was its regional cluster strategy within Mexico that strengthened cohesion of the community, promoted familiarity and trust and increased collaboration around shared regional activities. This approach provided clear benefits that motivated participants.

Notable tips from CAMAFU:

- Invest early in participatory knowledge mapping to identify priority interests, existing relationships and potential contributions.<sup>4</sup> Engage members with updates and contacts that respond to their needs and connect them with relevant peers.
- Reduce costs, increase visibility and sustainability by embedding the CoP within an existing learning network or organization when possible.
- Anchor the CoP with a Web site and encourage its use by sending regular e-mail newsletters highlighting valuable content. CAMAFU blended its private face-to-face events with public access to Web resources resulting in more than 500,000 visits.<sup>5</sup>

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The USAID Knowledge for Development Strategy identifies such communities as vital to allowing USAID to reach its full knowledge-sharing capacity and improve its business process.<sup>2</sup> It recognizes that CoPs can generate value by:

- Decreasing the learning curve of new staff;
- Creating a more direct link between learning and performance, leveraging investments made in formal training programs;
- Preventing “reinvention of the wheel;”
- Enabling more rapid response to complex constituent needs; and
- Accelerating the development and dissemination of innovative ideas.

### What Are the Key Principles for Cultivating Communities of Practice?

Perhaps the most important attribute of a CoP is its energy. Communities need to invite and foster the interaction that makes them come alive. While CoPs tend to be self-forming and self-governing, in most cases “aliveness” does not just happen. There are certain techniques and tools that can facilitate the creation and operation of dynamic, productive communities. In *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott and William Snyder identify seven principles that offer great guidance.<sup>6</sup>

### 1. Design for evolution.

Communities of practice are *social and organic*; therefore, designing them is more an act of guiding their evolution than creating them from scratch. They are often built on pre-existing relationships and networks; therefore, the purpose of design is not to impose a new structure but to help catalyze community participation and development. This design principle may feel at odds with the demands of detailed implementation plans and project timelines, but sometimes it is more productive to say “yes” to what may look chaotic by comparison.

### 2. Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives.

Good community design requires an insider’s perspective. Insiders are people familiar with the core issues and unique challenges of their field, the knowledge that is important to share and the latent potential in emerging ideas that need traction. However, insiders may be missing important perspectives that outsiders can bring—from innovative technical expertise to fresh ideas for how CoPs work in other organizations. Effective CoP design brings outside information into the dialogue about what the community can achieve.

### 3. Invite different levels of participation.

Effective CoPs encourage different levels of participation. While there is no substitute for a committed core group of people, everyone will not participate equally, and CoP design should invite opportunities for people to just observe from the periphery moving towards active participation when inspired. While it is important to identify and reward coordinators and activists at the core, these people typically represent fewer than 4% of a community. Recognizing the *lurkers*—persons who read discussions on a message board, newsgroup, chatroom, file sharing or

other interactive system, but rarely, if ever, post or participate—and providing pathways to become more active is an important challenge.<sup>7</sup> The key to participation and healthy movement is to embrace people at all levels as full members of the community.

### 4. Develop both public and private community spaces.

In an international development environment where programs often have pre-selected participants and implementing organizations are often hyper-competitive, it is important to resist the urge to create unnecessarily private, closed communities. Creating more permeable CoPs that open public spaces like events and Web sites to more diverse participation can lead to a more dynamic knowledge exchange and generate a broader impact. Coordinators must orchestrate activities in both public and private spaces that leverage the strength of individual relationships to enrich events and use events to bolster individual relationships.

### 5. Focus on value.

Value is key to community life, because participation in most CoPs is voluntary and directed by self-interest. Encourage people to be explicit about the value they expect or are receiving from their participation. Consider value at three distinct levels:

- a) Organizational level—Clearly identify the organizational drivers that will catalyze commitment and investment. Why is this important to the organization, donor or sector?
- b) Community level—Clarify the agenda and stay on topic or the CoP risks falling apart. Why are we together?
- c) Individual level—Identify what matters to participants. What are the incentives and interests that will drive their participation? What are the participant benefits, why should I get involved or stay involved?

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### 6. Combine familiarity and excitement.

Regular events, newsletters, meetings and Web site use create a sense of familiarity and comfort within a CoP. The more comfortable people become, the more likely they will regard the community as a trusted place where they can share candid advice, opinions and unpolished ideas. Vibrant CoPs inject divergent thinking and activity that excite its members. Experiment with inviting, thought-provoking speakers or organizing events that expose people to different ideas. CoPs can become great spaces for people to get re-energized about their work create new relationships and take risks that might just lead to pattern-breaking innovation.

### 7. Create a rhythm for the community.

Vibrant communities of practice have a rhythm that is created by community events and interpersonal interactions. Just like a human pulse, the community has a heartbeat driven by action. Match the rhythm to the participants. Too much action may overload people and drive them away; too little and the community may feel sluggish or dormant. Regular events like a monthly breakfast meeting or annual conference can generate the steady beat around which other interactions, both interpersonal and public create the rhythm and sense that the community is truly alive and moving people forward.

## What Resources Offer Detailed Guidance for Establishing a CoP?

There several different stages with multiple steps in the development of an effective CoP. One must carefully consider approaches to planning, marketing, coordinating, sustaining and evaluating CoPs. Fortunately there is a growing number of high-quality resources available, which offer detailed guidance through the various stages. Some recommended resources include:

- *Community of Practice Implementation Guide*. Defense Acquisition University. October 2007. v3.0. See appendix A for a 14 step community-building process. Available at <https://acc.dau.mil/CommunityBrowser.aspx?id=170879>. Accessed July 2009.
- *Cultivating Communities of Practice*. Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, William Snyder. 2002. Perhaps the best single reference book on the topic.
- *Communities @USAID Technical Guidance*. USAID. September 2006 Provides a good “how to” guide and resource recommendations. Available at [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNADH222.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADH222.pdf). Accessed July 2009.
- KM4Dev. A community of international development practitioners interested in knowledge management. Dynamic email list and useful archived resources. Available at [www.km4dev.org](http://www.km4dev.org). Accessed July 2009.
- Gurteen Knowledge Website. Check out the Communities of Practice category. Available at [www.gurteen.com](http://www.gurteen.com). Accessed July 2009.
- The Impact Alliance. The CoP topic folder contains useful resources. Available at [http://www.impactalliance.org/ev\\_en.php?ID=1773\\_201&ID2=DO\\_TOPIC](http://www.impactalliance.org/ev_en.php?ID=1773_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC). Accessed July 2009.
- CPsquare. A community of practice on CoPs. Available at [www.cpsquare.org](http://www.cpsquare.org). Accessed July 2009.

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### References

- <sup>1</sup> *Evolving Communities of Practice: IBM Global Services Experience*. IBM Systems Journal, Volume 40, Number 4, 2001. Available at <http://www.research.ibm.com/journal/sj/404/gongla.html>. Accessed July 2009.
- <sup>2</sup> Communities @USAID Technical Guidance. USAID. PN-ADH-222 September 2006. Available at [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNADH222.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADH222.pdf). Accessed July 2009.
- <sup>3</sup> *Learning Community for Fire Management (CAMAUFU) Rating Report*. ForeignAid Ratings, LLC. 2006. Available at <http://tinyurl.com/camafu-rating-english>. Accessed July 2009.
- <sup>4</sup> Knowledge mapping refers to a process that identifies knowledge residing within an organization, or among a set of organizations. It highlights and organizes knowledge assets, such as documents or subject matter experts, so that people may more quickly and comprehensively appreciate key knowledge resources that exist, learn where to find the people who can offer their expertise, and understand the gaps to bridge.
- <sup>5</sup> Explore the Mexican Conservation Learning Network at [www.imacmexico.org](http://www.imacmexico.org) and CAMAFU at [http://www.imacmexico.org/ev\\_es.php?ID=1038\\_201&ID2=DO\\_COMMUNITY](http://www.imacmexico.org/ev_es.php?ID=1038_201&ID2=DO_COMMUNITY). Accessed July 2009.
- <sup>6</sup> Wenger, E., Richard A. McDermott, and William M. Snyder. 2002. *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- <sup>7</sup> One study of large online communities estimated that upwards of 90% of users are lurkers (i.e., read or observe, but don't contribute). There is a growing body of literature highlighting the value of the lurker.

#### For more information:

This NGO Tips brief is available online at [www.NGOConnect.NET](http://www.NGOConnect.NET). This dynamic and interactive site is dedicated to connecting and strengthening non-governmental organizations (NGOs), networks, and support organizations worldwide.

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