

Communities of Practice

Introduction

Etienne Wenger, author of the seminal book *Cultivating Communities* defines **Communities of Practice** (CoPs) as follows: ‘... groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis’.

As this definition implies, communities can be very different from each other. Some of the dimensions along which they might be assessed include: membership composition (e.g. very homogeneous or very diverse ones); dispersion (small and community focused, international virtual networks); and purpose (very closely defined purpose or broad and far-reaching). This definition would also include many things that are not CoPs, for example, project teams and so on. Communities and networks are distinct from other kinds of collaborative mechanisms, as shown in Figure 11 below. The key distinguishing characteristics are that membership of a CoP is voluntary, and their goals and objectives tend, on the whole, to be fluid rather than determined by management objectives.

Figure 11: Communities/networks compared with other collaborative mechanisms

	Purpose	Membership	Glue	Duration
Network / Community	Exchange knowledge	Self select	Passion, identification with group	Duration
Work Group	Deliver product / process	Managerial agreement	Job and common goal	Until restructured
Project Team	Accomplish specific task	Assigned or selected	Project milestones and goal	Project completion
Informal Networks	Pass on relevant information	Friends, acquaintances	Mutual need	As long as need exists

Many knowledge and learning initiatives are focused on supporting and fostering communities to ensure effective creating and sharing of knowledge. CoPs confer benefits on both organisations and individuals. They do this through performing the following, overlapping functions (Court and Mendizabal, 2005):

- **Filters** ‘decide’ what information is worth paying attention to and organise unmanageable amounts of information. For example, the Development Executive Group is an international forum which provides and exchanges information on project and employment opportunities.
- **Amplifiers** help take little known or little understood ideas and make them more widely understood. Advocacy or campaigning NGOs such as the Jubilee Campaign are amplifying networks. The FairTrade Foundation, for instance, works through a network of those licensed to use the brand to amplify the fair trade message.
- **Convenors** bring together people or groups of people. For example, Coalition 2000 in Bulgaria brings together CSOs, government institutions, the private sector and donors in various coordinated initiatives to fight corruption.
- **Facilitators** help members carry out their activities more effectively. For example, the MediCam network in Cambodia gives members access to services and facilities such as meeting rooms, a

specialised library, communication means, training opportunities and access to policymakers and donors.

- **Community builders** promote and sustain the values and standards of the individuals or organisations within them. The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) promotes best practice and minimum standards of learning accountability and performance among humanitarian agencies.
- **Investor/providers** offer a means to give members the resources they need to carry out their main activities. The African Capacity Building Foundation, for instance, provides technical assistance, skills and funding to its policy research partners.

Communities usually carry out several functions simultaneously. However, different functions require different structures for maximum effectiveness. Networks designed for – and effective at – one role may not be good at others. Introducing new functions might compromise the original objectives. Specific networks will need to consider carefully how many and which functions they can carry out successfully.

Detailed description of the process

There is a rich literature on networks and communities, which covers a variety of different methods and approaches. The NHS toolkit suggests that there are three phases that should be considered: birth, development and growth, and closure (see: www.library.nhs.uk/knowledgemanagement).

Phase 1: Birth

Communities of practice emerge in an organic fashion and cannot in general be managed into existence. They can, however, be fostered, by identifying areas where knowledge might be better shared and used. Once this has been identified (e.g. administrative knowledge within an organisation), a number of questions should be addressed:

- **What** is the knowledge focus of the community? Is it based on a professional discipline, or does it focus on some specific issue or opportunity?
- **Who** can contribute to the community? Who are the experts, the facilitators, the movers and shakers? Should invitation be open or by invitation?
- **What** are the common needs and interests of the group? What is the group interested in? What benefits do they expect through joining the community?
- **What is the purpose** of the community? What needs or problems need to be addressed? What does community want to achieve? How will the community benefit the organisation? What are its values and ways of working? How will it be structured and organised? How will it obtain resources? Can terms of reference be developed?

Communities are often best launched with a meeting or workshop to enable face-to-face contact and the initiation of relationships within the context of the new community. This also provides an opportunity to work through the detail associated with the questions above and to clarify objectives and the terms of reference.

Phase 2: Development and growth

There is a need to ensure that, after the initial excitement, the CoP maintains interest and commitment. The community coordinator should be seeking to maintain the life of the community by ensuring face-to-face meetings, arranging social events, rewarding contributions, introducing new and challenging perspectives, and getting external perspectives. Member turnover will always be an issue, and ongoing recruitment will be required to maintain the energy. Roles and responsibilities should be rotated between members over time. There is also a need to ensure that there is support for participation in the network from the wider organisation, which should be achieved by aligning goals of the CoP with the wider organisational goals. Support should be in terms of both freeing up time and recognising the contributions of the community.

At the development and growth stage, the CoP should be taking a greater role in managing knowledge that is at the heart of the community. This includes creating knowledge maps, organising resources, identifying knowledge gaps, and so on. Here, well established frameworks for creating and sharing knowledge are particularly important. The key at this stage is not to stifle social relationships at the heart of the network by the imposition of too strong a managerial imperative. This brings about the real challenge – to develop the community and the practice simultaneously. Community development requires strengthening the coordinator (spokesperson, organises, coordinates), facilitator (facilitates interactions within the community) and knowledge manager (explicit knowledge resources management). Training and support for this may be required. Practice development takes inputs and outputs: the resources the community uses and develops. These consist not only of information and knowledge such as documents, databases, a website, etc. but also of processes and practices within the community.

Phase 3: Closure

Communities and networks can come to an end naturally as its members come to an end-point of the purpose. In other cases, the community may fragment into multiple smaller communities based around particular specialist subjects. When a community fades, it is important to celebrate its life and achievements, and to ensure that the relevant body of knowledge is captured and transferred.

Key points/practical tips

A DFID good practice guide boils these down to the following sets of questions (DFID, 2004):

- Starting-up a network:
 - Have you double-checked your reasons for starting a community/network?
 - When should this network become active?
 - What type of network will yours be?
 - What kind of facilitation will your network need?
 - What kinds of behaviours and activities are appropriate to a facilitator?
 - What tools and channels of communication can you use for facilitating a network?
- How to involve external participants in networks:
 - Be clear what the network is for before involving external participants.
 - Who exactly are the external participants going to be?
 - Who hosts the network?
- Sustaining a network:
 - What resource has the network got?
 - What makes your network valuable to its members?
 - How could you revive a faltering network?
 - Handing over the role of facilitator.
- What will happen when your network has done its job?

Example: Solution Exchange, an initiative of the UN agencies in India

To harness the vast tacit knowledge of development practitioners across India, the UN offices in India created Solution Exchange, a free, impartial space where professionals were able to share their knowledge and experience. Members represent a wide range of perspectives from government, NGOs, donors, private sector and academia. They are organised into communities of practice built around the framework of the MDGs. Through moderated email groups, members interact on an ongoing basis, building familiarity and trust, gaining in knowledge that helps them contribute more effectively – individually and collectively – to development challenges. Today, eight communities are up and running: Maternal and Child Health; Education; Work and Employment; Gender; Decentralization; AIDS;

Water and Environmental Sanitation; and Food and Nutrition Security. Membership has grown dramatically and at the time of writing stands at almost 4,300 subscriptions from across the country.

By the end of 2007, the project will have established 12 to 14 communities organised around these targets, demonstrating how CoPs can significantly enhance the effectiveness of national development efforts. Community members participate in Solution Exchange's personalised Research Service: members post questions on the community's mailgroup about development challenges they face, to which other members respond while the moderation team researches the issues. This tacit and expert knowledge is brought together in a summarised Consolidated Reply and circulated to the community, normally within 10 working days. The project also builds community identity and member affiliation through face-to-face meetings, community news updates and, in future, a community webpage. Additional features being introduced tap into the power of communities: group work to tackle larger development challenges and e-discussions to generate collective insights on a topic of interest. For example, in 2005, the AIDS CoP hosted a nationwide e-consultation as an input into the next phase of the National AIDS Control Programme, which generated over 300 contributions to the national policymaking body.

This example is drawn from www.solutionexchange-un.net.in/index.htm.

Sources and further reading

- Court, J. and E. Mendizabal (2005) *Networks: More than the latest buzzword*, ODI Opinion 57.
- Hovland, I. (2005) *Successful Communication: A Toolkit for Researchers and Civil Society Organisations*, ODI Working Paper 227, London: ODI.
- Perkin, E. and J. Court (2005) *Networks and Policy Processes in International Development: A Literature Review*, ODI Working Paper 252, London: ODI.
- The RAPID Networks website at www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Projects/PPA0103, which has a special focus on the role of networks in bridging research and policy.
- Wenger, E. (2002) *Cultivating Communities Practice*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- Collison, C. and G. Parcell (2001) *Learning to Fly*, Oxford: Capstone.
- DFID Good Practice Guide (2004), see: www.livelihoods.org/info/tools/Networks.pdf.
- NELHS Guide to Communities of Practice, see: www.nelh.nhs.uk/knowledge_management/km2/cop_toolkit.asp.