



Practice Tool

Developing a community of practice in your organisation

Introduction

This tool is about supporting and developing a learning culture in organisations through communities of practice (CoP).

Communities of practice offer a great opportunity for people to get together to develop their understanding and skills about a topic, address practice challenges and support the development of innovative local practices.

A key message for practice leaders is that supporting a community of practice of practice supervisors could be transformative for those in frontline management roles and really start to positively shift the organisational culture towards a learning organisation.

However, it is important to remember that supporting a CoP means letting go of the idea that learning, innovation and outcomes can be ordered.

What is a community of practice?

Observing how diverse groups of people learn a craft or an occupation, Lave and Wenger (1991) coined the notion of a community of practice. Wenger (1998) further developed this into an influential theory of social learning. The idea of communities of practice has informed many learning and knowledge management practices across the globe and remains an influential theory that helps us to understand practice-based learning.

Wenger et al. (2002, p. 4) define communities of practice as: ‘...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 on-going basis.’

Wenger (2004) names three constitutive characteristics of a CoP: ‘The “domain” is the shared area of interest that acts as a focus around which a “community” of concerned people form bonds in the process of their shared learning activities; while “practice” anchors the learning in what people do’ (Wenger, 2004, p .3).

For example, if a group of practitioners in an organisation voluntarily initiate a series of regular meetings to learn about a specific area of practice and exchange and share their knowledge, they start to develop a shared understanding of the issues they investigate (domain) and at the same time develop certain ways of interacting (community) and identities that are grounded in their regular exchanges (practice). Such collaborative learning can take place within an organisation or even across organisations.

How can a community of practice support learning and knowledge sharing?

Traditionally, learning, and professional development is understood as undertaking training or courses. There are some fundamental problems associated with this approach (Boud and Hager, 2012):

1. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is not sufficiently grounded in what practitioners actually do and therefore is often not integrated with the everyday practices in organisations.
2. CPD takes place outside of the organisation, following educational methods and resulting in learning that needs to be transferred into the organisational context, which remains problematic.

Even if these points are addressed through tailored training delivered in the organisation, lasting change in practice may not be achieved, because organisational, ‘culture eats training for breakfast’ (Forrester et al., 2018, p. 188). Therefore, we need to look at ways of professional learning that ‘focus not just on helping individuals to improve their practice but also on changing the organisational contexts which they work in’ (Forrester et al., 2018, p. 189). We are dealing with complexity that requires a different approach.

This is where communities of practice could play a crucial role because they ‘provide a concrete organisational infrastructure for realising the dream of a learning organisation’ (Wenger et al., 2002). They do this first, because people in a CoP address the challenges and concerns, they encounter in their practice. Secondly, a CoP within an organisation, rather than ‘transferring’ or ‘applying’ learning (e.g. a practice framework, a theory or research evidence) from the classroom to practice, can support the integration of different perspectives and forms of knowledge within practice itself.

Communities of practice have repeatedly been linked to knowledge management as a way to understand and support social and relational ways of sharing knowledge in organisations. The academic and management literature is full of examples where communities of practice are examined as a strategy for the co-creation and sharing of knowledge (Barbour et al., 2018). This is centred on a practice-based and social understanding of learning.

Learning is thus understood as something that:

- > is tightly linked to practice
- > emerges in the context of work
- > is deeply social and relational
- > is enabled or hindered through the social and material arrangements in organisations.

It has been argued that a CoP is able to respond to 'complex issues and foster collective resilience' because 'a broad community of peers and experts from different disciplines frees the collective intelligence and social imagination' (Goglio-Primard et al., 2020, p. 673).

Communities of practice can support a diverse range of colleagues to focus on the issues that matter to them, and in turn allow the organisation to hear and learn from different perspectives.

Considering anti-discriminatory and anti-racist principles, practice leaders need to pay attention to who is enabled to participate and what domains are being regarded as worth investing in to encourage and support diverse members of staff, including those who are marginalised, to participate. Communities of practice can thus help transform organisational contexts through curiosity, learning, innovation, and knowledge co-production.

Communities of practice are not like project teams or working groups and cannot be easily created. Setting goals, tasks or expecting deliverables does not lead to success. Practice leaders can only create the right conditions for communities of practice to grow in and flourish. At the same time, they do have considerable influence in creating the kind of organisational conditions in which colleagues are supported and encouraged to form and collaborate in a CoP. This is important because communities of practice require an environment in which practitioners are encouraged and supported to continuously and creatively engage with each other to co-produce the best possible ways forward and responses to practice challenges.

Points for reflection and discussion

Communities of practice build on the idea that if practitioners share a common concern, are given permission to investigate this, and are supported to engage with each other over time, learning and innovation will emerge.

- > How comfortable are you with this notion of self-directed practice-based learning?
- > Given that traditional education and training opportunities also offer many benefits, what might you lose if practitioners spend their CPD in self-organised learning in a CoP, rather than on CPD courses?
- > What topics are the practitioners and practice supervisors in your organisation interested in?
- > How could you support a CoP to investigate and learn about a particular topic?

What makes a community of practice successful?

In a literature review Staempfli et al. (2016) identified nine CoP design principles that act as success factors for communities of practice:

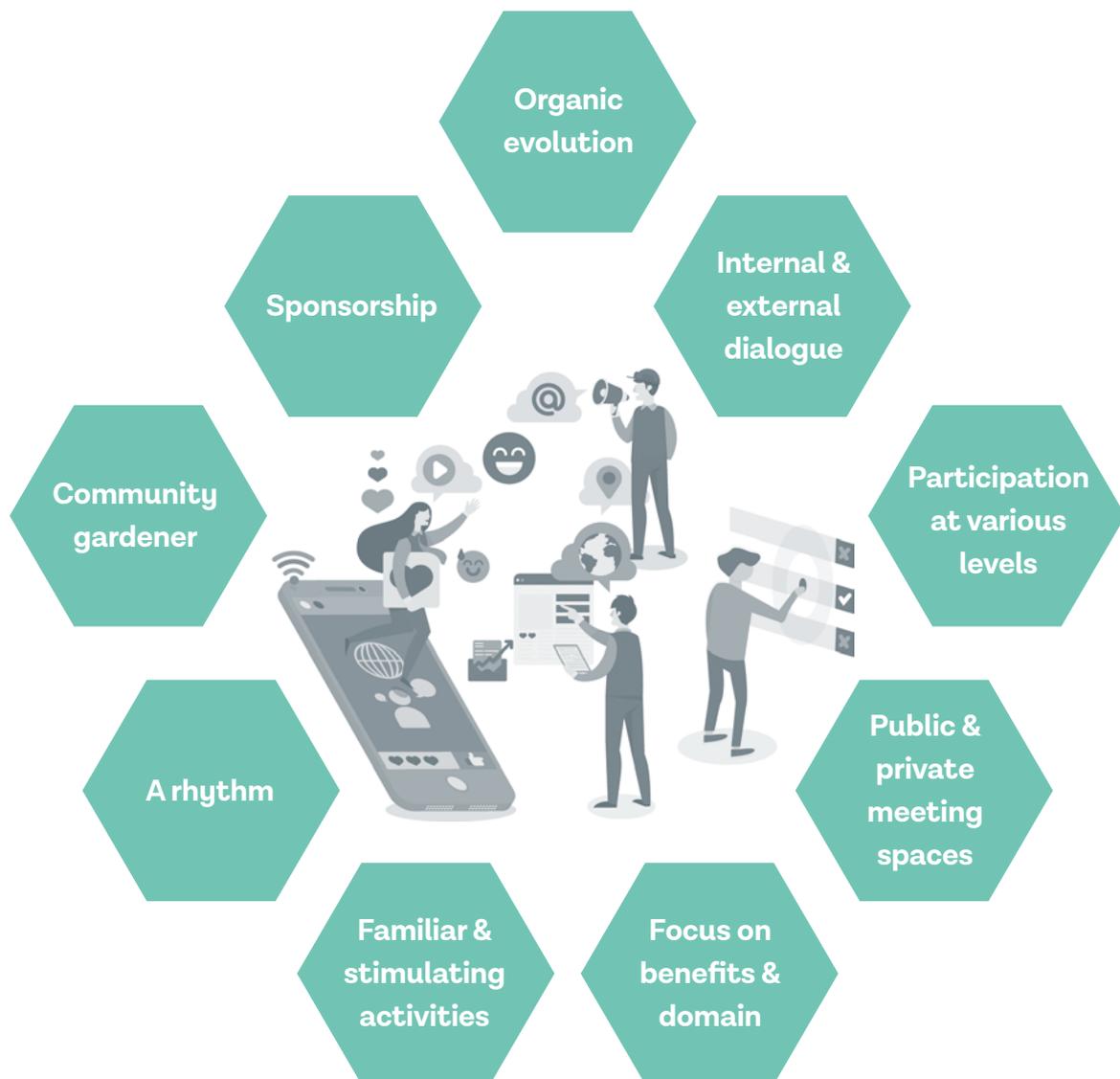


Figure 1: Nine design principles that support the flourishing of a CoP (based on Staempfli et al., 2016)

These principles can help you to support colleagues in your organisation to form and sustain an online or face-to-face CoP.

1. Go with the flow - focus the design of the CoP on evolution and development

Communities of practice are organic entities, which are affected by learning and continually engage in reflexive change. For this reason, a rigid goal orientation is counterproductive.

2. Facilitate a dialogue between internal and external perspectives

Successful communities of practice engage in constructive internal dialogue and generate new information. This dialogue thrives on an open attitude that values diversity and differing skills and perspectives.

3. Enable practitioners to participate at various levels

Communities of practice flourish with diverse forms of voluntary participation, from peripheral to active or core membership. Allow for flexible participation as involvement may change. Nourish practitioners' motivation to learn about the domain of the CoP and to share their knowledge with others as this sustains participation.

4. To support a relational approach, create both public and private meeting spaces

A community of practice is built on social relationships that are formed in shared activities around the domain and flourish through inclusion of informal fun aspects. Encourage practitioners to test out ideas in a climate of trust and safety.

5. A community of practice is attractive because of its domain (topic)

A community of practice develops and stays alive when it is useful for its members. Enable practitioners to follow their interests and engage with like-minded people. Let them develop objectives over time. This requires middle leaders to trust in the process, accepting that outcomes do not necessarily follow, and this may go against the dominant culture in organisations which focus on compliance, data gathering and outcomes.

6. Combine familiar with stimulating activities

Routine activities are stabilising and have a positive effect on forming and maintaining relationships and shared repertoires. Conversely, stimulating, and exciting endeavours open new perspectives and allow the CoP's members to imagine new avenues to pursue.

7. Create a rhythm for the community of practice

During its life, a CoP passes through various stages. Regular meetings help to strengthen ties among members and promote participation, shared practices, and understandings.

8. Provide every community of practice with a community gardener

A well-functioning CoP needs a person that keeps the group together with commitment and charisma, gains new members and supports the building of trust and relationships. Designated leaders can motivate community members to collaborate by making the CoP attractive and by supporting its work.

9. Support members and the community of practice through sponsorship

It is vital that practice leaders support communities of practice to guarantee necessary resources, such as time to attend, a room to meet in and an acknowledgement and appreciation of their value. Sponsors are best kept informed of the work so that they can see the emerging value of the CoP.

Conclusion

Supporting learning in organisations takes courage and requires the embracing of complexity. Supporting people to come together within their own organisation to develop their knowledge, skills, and practice, means letting go of control and specified outcomes. The reward is motivated colleagues who are engaged in learning with each other, and in doing so contribute to knowledge and practice innovation.

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