What Is a Community of Practice?
A Strategy for Achieving Desired Outcomes
in the Cultures of Giving: Innovation and Impact across Communities Cluster

Introduction

At the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, convening is viewed as one of the more powerful tools that can be used by Program Directors to attain the goals of Foundation funded initiatives. Convening people has been compared to “tossing a pebble into a pond,” the ripples of which have multiple outcomes; both anticipated and unplanned.

Some connections are inevitable. Given enough time and individual efforts at networking, some people are bound to meet and find that they share a passion. Convening, at its simplest, attempts to speed the process by “making introductions” and involves bringing together a diverse group who share some common interest. A convening can provide powerful insight to an issue that can influence the design of future initiatives or shape policy. In the Cultures of Giving cluster, it is hoped that periodic convenings will lead to the formation of a community of practice that functions outside the time and space of the individual meetings.

The following discussion of communities of practice draws heavily from the work of Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002). Our review of literature documenting communities of practice as they are being implemented in organizations today indicates that very little is being written about communities of practice outside of intact, for-profit corporations. These authors have written the first book that provides a common foundation grounded in the efforts underway in leading organizations from many fields. They are also the first to discuss general characteristics and challenges of “distributed” communities of practice – a form which describes the Cultures of Giving community.

This document was prepared by CenterPoint Institute. For questions, comments or to request additional copies, please contact:

CenterPoint Institute
11000 Front Street
Mokena, IL  60448
Voice: (708) 478-6494  Fax: (708) 478-6495
www.CenterPointInstitute.com
What is a Community of Practice?

Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002) 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 ongoing basis.

These people don’t necessarily work together every day, but they meet because they find value in their interactions. As they spend time together, they typically share information, insight, and advice. They help each other solve problems. They discuss their situations, their aspirations, and their needs. They ponder common issues, explore ideas, and act as sounding boards. They may create tools, standards, generic designs, manuals, and other documents – or they may simply develop a tacit understanding that they share. However they accumulate knowledge, they become informally bound by the value that they find in learning together. This value is not merely instrumental for their work. It also accrues in the personal satisfaction of knowing colleagues who understand each other’s perspectives and of belonging to an interesting group of people. Over time, they develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices, and approaches (emphasis added). They also develop personal relationships and established ways of interacting. They may even develop a common sense of identity. They become a community of practice.

Communities of practice are not a new idea. They were our first knowledge-based social structures, back when we lived in caves and gathered around a fire to discuss strategies for cornering prey, the shape of arrow heads, or which roots were edible. In ancient Rome, “corporations” of metal workers, potters, masons, and other craftsmen had both the social aspect [members worshiped common deities and celebrated holidays together] and a business function [training apprentices and spreading innovations]. In the Middle Ages, guilds fulfilled similar roles for artisans throughout Europe. Guilds lost their influence during the industrial revolution, but communities of practice have continued to proliferate to this day in every aspect of human life. Every organization and industry has its own history of practice-based communities, whether formally recognized or not. Why else are the surviving U.S. automakers all based in Detroit? What explains the high-tech fertility of Silicon Valley? And why can’t you buy a world-class flute outside of three small manufacturers based in Boston? (pgs. 4-5)

Communities of practice are pervasive; we all belong to several – at work, at school, at home, in our hobbies. Some have names, some don’t. Some we recognize as communities of practice, while some remained largely invisible. We are core members of some communities and occasional participants in others. Regardless of our level of participation, most of us are familiar with the experience of belonging to a community of practice.

If communities of practice have been so enduring, why should organizations suddenly focus on them? Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002) indicate that it is not communities of practice themselves that are new but the need for organizations to become more intentional and systematic about managing knowledge, and therefore to give these age-old structures a new, central role in business.
Knowledge has become the key to success and is too valuable a resource to be left to chance. Organizations need to understand exactly what will give them a competitive advantage and therefore need to stay on the leading edge in terms of knowledge development, be able to deploy knowledge in their operations, and to spread it across the organization. “Cultivating communities of practice in strategic areas is a practical way to manage knowledge as an asset, just as systematically as companies manage other critical assets. Indeed, the explosion in science and technology creates a difficult paradox. At the same time that the increasing complexity of knowledge requires greater specialization and collaboration, the half-life of knowledge is getting shorter. Without communities focused on critical areas, it is difficult to keep up with the rapid pace of change” (ibid, pg. 6).

“What makes managing knowledge a challenge is that it is not an object that can be stored, owned, and moved around like a piece of equipment or a document. It resides in the skills, understanding, and relationships of its members as well as the tools, documents, and processes that embody aspects of this knowledge” (ibid, pg. 11).

What has been missing is an understanding of the kind of social structure that can take responsibility for fostering learning, developing competencies, and managing knowledge. Conventional structures are much more effective at addressing problems of performance and accountability than they are knowledge-related problems. Traditional knowledge-oriented structures, such as corporate universities and centers of excellence, are virtually nonexistent in the nonprofit sector. Many for-profit companies are discovering that by assigning responsibility for “stewarding” knowledge to the practitioners themselves to generate and share the knowledge they need, these communities of practice provide a social forum that supports the living nature of knowledge.

Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002) believe that there is much one can do to cultivate communities of practice. Just as plants will grow on their own whether their seeds are carefully planted to blown into place by the wind, when one endeavors to cultivate them the results include healthier plants with greater yield. Similarly, some communities of practice will grow spontaneously while others may require careful seeding. Either way, there is much that organizations can do to create an environment that supports the development of communities: valuing the learning they do, making time and other resources available for their work, encouraging participation, and removing barriers.
Ways that Communities of Practice Create Value

Communities of practice do not merely manage knowledge assets; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002) describe multiple and complex ways that they create value, both for their members and for organizations.

Short-term and long-term value. In the short-term, members can get help with immediate problems and spend less time hunting for information or solutions. By including the perspectives of their peers, members of communities of practice often devise better solutions and make better decisions. Because they feel supported by a community, members can be more daring in taking risks or trying new things. Members can coordinate efforts and find synergies across organizational boundaries. As they address current problems, communities are also building sustained value by developing an ongoing practice that will serve each organization’s long-term strategy. Communities of practice also address members’ need for professional development, helping them keep abreast of new developments in their field and benchmarking their expertise against that of colleagues in other organizations.

Tangible and intangible value. The value communities create may include tangible results such as a standards manual, improved skills, or reduced costs through faster access to information. It may also include less tangible outcomes such as a sense of trust or an increased ability to innovate. Tying the activities of a community of practice to tangible business outcomes is important. The ability to articulate the value of communities in terms of their tangible effects on performance provides them the legitimacy they need to steward knowledge effectively. However, it is still important to remember that some of the greatest value of communities of practice lies in intangible outcomes, such as the relationships built among people, the sense of belonging and spirit of inquiry generated, and the professional confidence and identity conferred to their members.

Strategy-implementing and strategy-making value. Communities of practice provide value through their ability to implement existing strategies as well as develop new ones. On the one hand, communities of practice can contribute to the development of highly competent frontline practitioners who understand the products, are aware of market trends, know what it takes to beat the competition, and are able to implement new business strategies. On the other hand, when highly developed, influential communities of practice keep abreast of market opportunities as well as their own practice development they can inform or enact new strategic initiatives.

Connecting professional development and corporate strategy. Most important, communities of practice create value by connecting the personal development and professional identities of practitioners to the strategy of the organization; successful ones deliver value to members and to their organizations. If it is not clear how members benefit directly from participation, the community will not thrive because the members will not invest the necessary time and effort. Similarly, if the community’s value to the organization as a whole is not understood, it is difficult to justify investing resources. The ability to combine the needs of organizations and community members is crucial in the knowledge economy, where companies succeed by fully engaging the creativity of their employees. The multiple and complex ways in which communities of practice deliver value to both members and organizations is the reason they are fast becoming a central part of the management agenda (ibid, pg. 18).
According to Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002), communities of practice are as diverse as the situations that foster their development and the people who populate them.

**Small or big.** Some communities of practice are small and intimate, while others consist of hundreds of people. Size does not matter. Very large communities are structured differently than small ones, usually subdivided by geographic region or by subtopic in order to encourage all members to take part actively.

**Long-lived or short-lived.** The development of practice takes time, but the lifespan of communities of practice varies widely. Some exist over centuries, such communities of artisans who pass their craft from generation to generation. Many are shorter-lived but still last several years.

**Co-located or distributed.** Sharing a practice requires regular interaction. Many communities start among people who work at the same place or live nearby, but co-location is not a necessity; many communities of practice are distributed over wide areas. Scientists have long formed communities of practice by communicating across the globe by letter, and now by email. Distributed communities are often connected primarily by email and phone and may meet only once or twice a year. What allows members to share knowledge is not the choice of a specific form of communication [face-to-face, web-based, etc.], but the existence of a shared practice – a common set of situations, problems, and perspectives. New technologies and globalization are quickly making distributed communities of practice the standard rather than the exception.

**Homogeneous or heterogeneous.** Some communities are homogenous, composed of people from the same discipline or function. Others bring together people with different backgrounds – for instance, all people from different functions who deal with a particular type of customer or region of the country. While it may be easier to start a community among people of similar backgrounds, having a common problem is also a strong motivation for building a shared practice. Over time, people with different backgrounds may end up as closely bonded as people who started with a lot in common.

**Inside and across boundaries.** Communities of practice can exist entirely within a business unit or stretch across divisional boundaries. Increasingly, however, communities cross the boundaries between organizations.

**Spontaneous or intentional.** Many communities of practice start spontaneously, without any intervention or development effort from the organization, as members need each other as peers and learning partners. In other cases, organizations intentionally develop specific communities to advance a needed capability.

**Unrecognized to institutionalized.** Some communities of practice are largely unrecognized, even by their participants. Consider the regular, informal meetings in a teachers’ lounge where problems with students or classroom management are discussed. Over time, they created a history they all know about and can use to solve new problems. Yet the teachers may not be explicitly aware that these meetings have become one of their main sources of new knowledge. The school administration likely has no knowledge of the value of such informal discussions. On the other end of the spectrum, some communities are so valuable that they have been incorporated into the official structure of the organization.
Three Elements that Characterize Communities of Practice

According to Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002), each community of practice is “a unique combination of three fundamental elements: a domain of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a community of people who care about this domain; and the shared practice that they are developing to be effective in their domain” (pg. 27).

1. The domain (field or discipline) creates common ground and a sense of common identity. When well-defined, the domain legitimizes the community by affirming its purpose and value to the community’s members and other stakeholders. The domain is what inspires members to contribute and participate, guiding their learning and giving meaning to their actions. Knowing the boundaries and the leading edge of the domain allows members to decide exactly what knowledge is worth sharing, how to present their ideas, and which activities to pursue.

   Without commitment to a domain, a community is just a group of friends. A shared domain creates a sense of accountability to a body of knowledge and thus to the development of a practice. The domain guides the questions they ask and the way they organize their knowledge. It helps them sort out what to share and how to distinguish between a trivial idea and one with real promise.

   The domain of a community of practice can range from mundane know-how to highly specialized, professional expertise. It is easier to define a domain when there is already an established discourse, as is the case with a professional discipline, but what brings members together is not always based on recognized topics. Members of a community may indeed share a profession or a discipline (such as nonprofit management, or philanthropy), have the same job or role (trainers, executive directors), or deal with the same clients. But they may also face similar problems that are not officially recognized as domains (online facilitation, document management, aggressive customers).

   A well-developed domain becomes a statement of what knowledge the community will steward. It is a commitment to take responsibility for an area of expertise and to provide the best knowledge and skills that can be found.

2. The community creates the social structure for learning, fostering interactions and relationships based on mutual trust and respect. A supportive social structure encourages members to share their ideas, expose one’s ignorance, ask difficult questions, and listen carefully. Community is important because “learning is a matter of belonging as well as an intellectual process, involving the heart as well as the head” (ibid, pg. 29).

   A community of practice is not just a web site, a database, or a collection of best practices. It is a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment. Having others who share one’s overall view of the domain and yet bring their individual perspectives on any given problem creates a social learning system that goes beyond the sum of its parts. Knowing each other makes it easier to ask for help: people know who is likely to have an answer and feel confident that their question is welcome.
To build a community of practice, members must interact regularly on issues important to their domain. They can all be executive directors in different organizations, but unless they interact they do not form a community of practice. These interactions must have some continuity; a good conversation on an airplane or at a conference does not constitute a community of practice. Interacting regularly, members develop a shared understanding of their domain and an approach to their practice, build valuable relationships based on respect and trust, and build a sense of common history and identity.

Membership may be self-selected or assigned, but the actual level of engagement is a personal matter; in this sense, participation is voluntary. Participation can certainly be encouraged, but the kind of personal investment that makes for a vibrant community cannot be invented or forced. Sometimes a bit of prodding is needed to help people to discover the value of learning together. However, the success of a community of practice depends on the energy that the community itself generates, not on an external mandate.

3. The term practice denotes a set of socially defined ways of doing things in a specific domain: a set of common approaches and shared standards that create a basis for action, communication, problem solving, performance, and accountability. The practice is made up of “a set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles, language, stories, and documents that community members share. Whereas the domain denotes the topic the community focuses on, the practice is the specific knowledge the community develops, shares, and maintains” (ibid, pg. 29).

An effective practice evolves as a collective product of the community and is integrated into people’s work. It organizes knowledge in a way that is especially useful to practitioners because it reflects their perspective. Each community has a specific way of making its practice visible; the mode of communicating and capturing knowledge matches the demands of actual use.

A community shares an understanding of which aspects of its domain are codifiable and which are not, and what to do in each case. Successful practice development depends on a balance between joint activities, in which members explore ideas together, and the production of “things” like documents or tools. It involves an ongoing interplay of codification and interactions, of the explicit and the tacit. Documentation is not a goal in itself, but an integral part of the life of the community. The twin goals of interacting with peers and creating knowledge products complement each other.

When they function well together, these three elements make a community of practice an ideal knowledge structure – a social structure that can assume responsibility for developing and sharing knowledge.
“Distributed” Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are loosely connected, informal, and self-managed; they are based on collegiality, not on reporting relationships. Membership in a community depends on participation, not institutional affiliation. Members participate for many different reasons and to varying degree. Some participate because they care about the domain and want help with its development. Others primarily seek to interact with peers, people who share something important. Some have devoted most of their lives to learning one profession and find that connecting with peers who share that passion is their motivation. Communities are a place where people can make a contribution and be certain it will genuinely be appreciated. Other members simply want to learn about the practice: what standards have been established, what tools work well, what lessons have been learned by master practitioners? Regardless the original motivations to join a community, members often stay because they become emotionally connected to the community.

A “distributed” community of practice is one that cannot rely on face-to-face meetings and interactions to connect members. Typically distributed communities connect people across time zones and organizational units. In an era of globalization and worldwide communication networks, distributed communities are increasingly becoming the norm. In some respects, the Cultures of Giving cluster is a distributed community comprised of members representing many different organizations. There are several issues that must be addressed in forming a distributed community.

Distance: Connections and visibility. Different time zones and distance obviously make it difficult for members to connect in person. Instead, they rely on technologies that are not real substitutes for in-person interactions. Distance makes it more difficult for members to remember that the community exists. Distributed communities generally feel less “present” to their members. On a conference call or a web site, community members are not visible unless they contribute by posting a question or asking for help. Members cannot see others reading, and benefiting from, a threaded discussion. Unlike in-person meetings, web sites do not offer easy opportunities for informal networking. Because of these barriers, it takes more intentional effort for members to consult the community for help, spontaneously share ideas, or network with other members.

Size: Knowing people. Because distributed communities usually draw from a wide base of membership, they can be very large. It may not be possible to know all of the members personally, even in a face-to-face meeting, let alone with the mediation of technology.

Affiliation: Priorities and intellectual property. Participation in distributed communities is complicated by the need to develop criteria for dealing with intellectual property. This issue can be a big stumbling block for communities of practice that span several different organizations, where intellectual property is a source of competitive advantage. Should all ideas and material developed in the community belong to all members? Can individual organizations do whatever they will with ideas and material they develop with the community’s input? Resolving such questions takes time and can test the level of trust the members have in one another. In one community, rather than creating a complex ownership system the members simply agreed to share only knowledge that they thought could be disseminated within other member organizations without adverse effect to their own – much like a professional association.
“Distributed” Communities of Practice (continued)

Culture: Communication and values. National cultures are the most obvious type, but organizational and professional cultures can also present problems in distributed communities. Acceptable behavior – such as willingness to ask questions that reveal “ignorance,” disagree with others in public, contradict experts, discuss their problems, follow others in the thread of conversation – varies greatly across cultures.

Defining the Domain: Reconciling multiple agendas. Distributed communities can expect to have a greater diversity of viewpoints, needs, interests, priorities, and expectations than local groups. At the same time, because of their distributed nature they have fewer opportunities to negotiate these issues. A primary challenge for distributed communities is to narrow the focus and scope of the domain and still maintain enough variety in the scope of topics such that all members are willing to invest time and effort.

Building the community: Trust and personal relationships. Because members of distributed communities have less contact, they have to work harder to build trust between members. The trust-building process takes place largely in the private space of the community by increasing the connections between the individual members. In local communities, there are many opportunities for spontaneous networking and making new contacts. Because there are fewer such opportunities in distributed communities they must be more intentional about connecting people, finding opportunities for members to interact, and building interpersonal relationships. They also need to address issues of norms and openness more explicitly; they cannot assume that norms are already shared or that there is enough interaction and common ground for norms to emerge.

Developing the practice: Craft intimacy. Successful communities of practice develop a strong sense of “craft intimacy” – close interactions around a set of shared problems and a sense of commonality. Obviously craft intimacy is more difficult to achieve in distributed communities. A sense of craft intimacy does not mean that all organizations use the same practices; it does mean that they understand and learn from each other’s practice. Distributed communities provide a forum in which to “talk shop,” solve problems with colleagues, and in the process find ways to learn from each other’s perspectives and local conditions.

The factors and challenges discussed mean that creating distributed communities involves special effort. But if a community can overcome these obstacles, the rewards are great. Designing and nurturing distributed communities that can overcome these barriers requires additional effort in four key element activities:

1. Achieve stakeholder alignment;
2. Create a structure that promotes both local variations and global connections;
3. Build a rhythm strong enough to maintain community visibility;
4. Develop the private space of the community more systematically.

1. Achieve key stakeholder alignment. Overcoming differences in geography, affiliation, and culture requires more time and effort to define the domain and develop commitment from community members. Engaging all players is essential to getting a good start for any community. Overcoming conflicting priorities and developing a common understanding of the potential value of the
“Distributed”
Communities of Practice
(continued)

2. Create a structure that promotes both local variations and global connections. Design a structure that allows for variations in culture, language, organization, and work without sacrificing the development of trust and connection among global community members. It can be helpful to think about a distributed community as a kind of fractal structure. Often a smaller, local sub-community connects members to other local communities as well as to the larger community. How a community is divided and how those divisions are connected are crucial elements of the design.

3. Build a rhythm strong enough to maintain community visibility. Because members of distributed communities don’t bump into each other in the hallway, the community is less visibly present and needs, as much or more than local communities, a set of regular events to give the community a heartbeat. Many distributed communities use the web as their primary form of connection enabling community members to participate in their own time; however purely online connections can feel out of sync with the often urgent rhythm of everyday work. When the community feels slow and out of sync, it can easily slip from people’s consciousness. While distributed communities cannot have weekly face-to-face meetings, regular and special events can be used to strengthen the community’s presence.

4. Develop the private space of the community more systematically. Differences in geography, affiliation, and culture increase the need for one-on-one networking in distributed communities. The personal networking that a coordinator (such as WKKF and consultants) does is crucial to starting a distributed community. Focusing on core practices or methodologies is one of the easiest ways for members to build connections. Deeply engaging people in both practical and cutting-edge issues in their field can create the common ground necessary for community members to overlook cultural differences.

Conclusion

What is being learned in businesses about organizing for learning and knowledge has important implications for the nonprofit sector. Because community-organizing methods emphasize voluntary initiative and are organized around practices rather than boundaries that are defined by place or ownership structures, they are particularly relevant to market- and society-based applications. “Organizations that understand how to translate the power of communities into successful knowledge organizations will be the architects of tomorrow – not only because they will be more successful in the market, but also because they will serve as a learning laboratory for exploring how to design the world as a learning system” (ibid, pg. 232).

The W. K. Kellogg Foundation believes that if the Cultures of Giving cluster organizations choose to become a community of practice, not only will they be more successful as individual organizations, but they will also make an as yet unknown contribution to the nonprofit sector. Identifying the DOMAIN, committing to membership in the COMMUNITY, and honing the PRACTICE are tasks that lie in the future.