Building Communities of Practice
A summary guide

Prepared for INK ABM/URP, Ethekwini Municipality by Pioneers of Change (www.pioneersofchange.net)
Illustrations/visual language by Bigger Picture (www.biggerpicture.dk)

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Background

“We’ve got a single vision reality which is about using all our resources as effectively as possible – and not for the community, but with the community.”
- Participant from Winsford Networked Learning Community, UK

As government structures around the world are being challenged to take a more integrated and participative approach to governance and development, a type of cross-sector learning network called “Communities of Practice” are emerging and gaining momentum. Through peer-to-peer collaborative activities, members of Communities of Practice are coming together willingly across sectoral and departmental divides to share information, build knowledge, develop expertise, and solve problems.

This brief guidebook is based on a research project conducted by Pioneers of Change for Ethekwini Municipality in South Africa in 2005. The research was based on ten diverse international case studies of Communities of Practice in the public sector, ranging from Canada to India, from Brazil to Scotland.

The intention with this guidebook is to provide a quick summary and practical sense of Communities of Practice and their potential, and how to go about cultivating them effectively. It accompanies the 84-page report from the research project and an associated compendium of readings.
WHAT are CoPs?

“Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a passion for something they do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better.”

- Etienne Wenger

CoPs are…

⇒ peer-to-peer collaborative networks
⇒ driven by willing participation of members
⇒ focused on learning and building capacity
⇒ engaged in knowledge-sharing, developing expertise, solving problems

All CoPs will be unique depending on their context. There is no single ‘recipe’ for creating a CoP.
Push and Pull

CoPs are designed to access tacit knowledge in response to “PULL” as opposed to explicit, documented knowledge available through “PUSH”.

**PUSH** - Knowledge presented in meeting reports, manuals, and expert presentations is usually selected by the person or group with the knowledge, deciding what others need to know.

**PULL** - Communities of Practice recognise that the most practical knowledge lives in people. Here, it is the learning need, and the specific challenges faced in the now, that determine what knowledge gets passed on. Communities of Practice are about “know how” and “know who”.

![Diagram of Push and Pull concepts]
Dimensions of a CoP

CoPs are usually defined by three dimensions: the community, the domain, and the practice...

**Community**
- A group of people engaging in joint activities, helping each other and sharing knowledge
- Regular interaction
- Relationships of interdependence
- Feelings of trust, openness and commitment
- Held together by shared passions and interests
- Boundary-spanning, inter-disciplinary membership

**Domain**
- A focus on a shared field of interest and competence
- Related to members’ commitment and passion

**Practice**
- Practical focus on real everyday challenges
- Shared repertoire of techniques, tools, experiences, stories
- Learning activities engaged to build, share and apply the practice
- Sense of joint enterprise
What makes CoPs different from other groups?

In general…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>What’s the purpose?</th>
<th>Who belongs?</th>
<th>What holds them together?</th>
<th>How long do they last?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communities of Practice</strong></td>
<td>To develop members’ capabilities; to build and exchange knowledge</td>
<td>Members select themselves based on expertise or passion for a topic.</td>
<td>Passion, commitment, and identification with the group’s expertise</td>
<td>As long as there is interest in maintaining the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formal work groups</strong></td>
<td>To deliver a product or service</td>
<td>Members include everyone who reports to the group’s manager.</td>
<td>Job requirements and common goals</td>
<td>Until the next reorganization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Project teams</strong></td>
<td>To accomplish a specified task</td>
<td>Members are assigned by senior management.</td>
<td>The project’s goals and milestones</td>
<td>Until the project has been completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informal networks</strong></td>
<td>To collect and pass on information</td>
<td>Membership consists of friends and business acquaintances.</td>
<td>Mutual need and relationships</td>
<td>As long as people have a reason to connect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Wenger, “Communities of Practice: The organisational frontier” in HBR, 2001
WHO participates?

- Individuals, who are
- Practitioners, who come from
- Diverse departments and sectors
- Voluntarily because they
- Share a passion and interest
CoP lifecycle

Communities of Practice have a lifecycle. For CoPs in the public sector, the lifecycle is likely to display the following phases:

1. **Discovery**: Identifying strategic issues to address – those that align with both strategic objectives and members’ interests
2. **Committing**: Taking the conscious decision to move forward with a CoP
3. **Creating an Enabling Environment**: Making sure that the organisational context and support is available for the CoP
4. **Coalescing**: Convening members to develop an action-learning agenda and building their collective commitment to pursue it together
5. **Maturing**: Building on knowledge-sharing and co-consulting activities – toward collaborations on innovation and application projects; growing beyond the initial group
6. **Stewarding**: Establishing a prominent role in the field and taking stewardship for addressing leading-edge issues at scale
7. **Winding down**: Acknowledging when the CoP has served its purpose and needs to close; slowing down activities; preparing for closure
8. **Dispersing and leaving a legacy**: Beyond success, “what’s next”-could be institutionalization as a formal organization; letting the community dissolve once the issues lose salience; segmenting the community into sub-areas as issues become more differentiated.

[adapted from Snyder and Briggs, 2003 and Pioneers of Change case analysis]
Benefits of a CoP strategy

Ten stories of CoPs from around the world showed the impact of Communities of Practice in terms of:

- Solving problems
- Innovation and new ideas
- Professional development
- Development of new tools
- Contributing to the organisation’s mission!
- Creating a more holistic and integrated approach
- Making existing knowledge visible and accessible
- Building relationships
- Motivation
Roles

**Members** – populate the community, bring questions/problems, share knowledge, devise solutions, engage actively, usually including a core group and peripheral members

**Coordinator** – organises meetings, recruits and communicates with members, moderates email lists, supports CoP projects, weaving relationships with other stakeholders

**Facilitator** – facilitates group interaction during face-to-face meetings

**Information Integrator** – documents learning, helps to store knowledge, coordinates information, maintains information-sharing relationships

**Sponsor** – provides legitimacy, engages in a strategic alliance with CoP

**Guest experts** – offer specific areas of expertise needed at some meetings on invitation from the CoP

**Stakeholders** - state/local agencies and other groups who support or influence members and who could be influenced by their ideas and proposals

*Note that one person can play more than one role, and one role can be shared by more than one person.*
Learning Activities and Communication Tools

Face-to-face meetings

-> Group dialogues, case clinics, external input

Visits, peer exchanges, learning journeys, field trips

Email lists and website

Teleconferences and videoconferences

One-on-ones and informal interactions

Sms (for announcements)
Summary Overview of the CoP...

DIVERSE COMMUNITIES, DEPARTMENTS, SECTORS...

MEMBERS

FACILITATOR

CORE GROUP

COORDINATOR

INFORMATION INTEGRATOR

TOOLS

PROCESSES

PRACTISES

SPONSOR

INNOVATION, PROBLEM-SOLVING, ACTION LEARNING, RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING, DEVELOPMENT OF NEW TOOLS, LOCALISATION, PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, SUPPORT AND LEGITIMACY, EFFECTIVENESS

ORGANISATIONAL PURPOSE
Creating an enabling environment for CoPs

“Organizations and communities have always coexisted, but in the past, they have lived parallel lives, as it were. Today, they need to learn to recognize each other and function together in ways that let each do better what each does best.” – Etienne Wenger

- Recognition of time and effort of members
- Institutional willingness to listen to the community and be affected by it
- Energising tasks and expectations
- Executive sponsorship providing legitimacy, credibility, support and encouragement
- Information technology infrastructure making people and knowledge accessible
- Physical meeting spaces
- Skilled facilitation and dialogue tools
- Alignment in impact measurement
Cultivation, not Management

CoPs are cultivated, not managed. They require active engagement without control. Tips for cultivating:

- Stay focused on the primary purpose of learning
- Enable members to formulate their own questions and to access each other for answers
- Invite participants to express their interests and learning needs
- Build relationships of trust and knowledge-sharing across departments
- Provide infrastructure and resources that enable learning and collaboration
- Keep members energised through stimulating, quality discussion and real dialogue around cutting edge issues for them
- Keep feeding the CoP useful material and information, share information on visiting experts and other relevant events
- Remind members by email and sms of upcoming meetings to help them prioritise the CoPs activities
- Assess the success of the CoP by level of participation, diversity of participation, member development, member satisfaction, and stories of problems and challenges solved through the work of the CoP
- Pay attention to participation of members – if people leave or join, try to find out why
Getting started

Acknowledging what exists already
Assessing the organisational context
Identifying member needs
Creating a business case
– why, what, who, how, when, where?

Commitment

Establishing the enabling environment
Inviting and convening members
Agreeing shared practices
Cultivating the CoPs

→ Experiencing the CoP lifecycle
For more information….

See “Building Communities of Practice” report to INK ABM/URP by Pioneers of Change July 2005 and associated compendium.

Websites:

www.ewenger.com
http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/
www.pioneersofchange.net

Articles:
