



Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge

Etienne Wenger , William Snyder , Richard A. McDermott

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Today's economy is fueled by knowledge. Every leader knows this to be true, yet few have systematic methods for converting organizational knowledge into economic value. This book argues that communities of practice--groups of individuals formed around common interests and expertise--provide the ideal vehicle for driving knowledge-management strategies and building lasting competitive advantage. Written by leading experts in the field, Cultivating Communities of Practice is the first book to outline models and methods for systematically developing these essential groups. Through compelling research and company examples, including DaimlerChrysler, McKinsey & Company, Shell, and the World Bank, authors Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William M. Snyder show how world-class organizations have leveraged communities of practice to drive strategy, generate new business opportunities, solve problems, transfer best practices, develop employees' professional skills, and recruit and retain top talent. Underscoring the new central role communities of practice are playing in today's knowledge economy, Cultivating Communities of Practice is the definitive guide to fostering, designing, and developing these powerful groups within and across organizations.

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From Reader Review Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge for online ebook

Mari says

Excellent handbook for starting, building, and closing down communities.

Karen says

I am an Executive Secretary for a large E/A Company with 15 district offices and and admin. staff of 84 people. Through "Cultivating Communities of Practice" I am learning how to set-up a CoP, elicit buy-in of other community members with the goals of sharing knowledge expeditiously throughout the admin. staff.

Bonnie Zink says

Although the information is a bit dated, the details of managing, forming, and using a community of practice to learn and grow as a professional is invaluable. I found the prose to be fractured in the sense that I could tell when the information was being put forth by one of the other authors. I'm looking forward to the possibility of a re-release of this title as communities of practice information has grown and the techniques have evolved.

E says

An unusual guide to developing communities of practice

Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott and William M. Snyder have written an exceptionally clear and honest book. While they obviously are deeply committed to communities of practice and exuberant in embracing the concept – particularly in the realm of knowledge management – they also have observed enough of these communities to see how they can fail to crystallize, can go bad or can survive but never gain recognition. This gives a distinctly realistic edge to their methodical book. The authors work through the definitions, core components and guiding principles of these communities, and describe how they fit within existing formal structures. They illustrate their claims with numerous examples. getAbstract advocates this solid introduction to communities of practice to two groups of readers: anyone interested in knowledge management and anyone interested in community development, including organizational culture.

J.R. Woodward says

Overview

Cultivating Communities of Practice is a manual and guide created by a community of authors in order to help businesses and organizations more thoughtfully and intentionally steward the knowledge of the community for the benefit of the whole. They understand that energy and “aliveness” about any topic is not

created or manufactured, but simply cultivated. Just like a farmer must cultivate the soil, plant the seeds, nurture the crop, and identify and deal with the weeds; the authors help us learn the in and outs of how to cultivate communities that learn to manage knowledge for the common good. In this guide they provide us with the three basic elements for communities of practice; the seven principles for cultivating these communities; the five developmental stages of these communities; the common disorders and treatments; and finally how to start communities of practice in such a way that these communities work for the benefit of the whole. This guide enables people to move from theory to practice.

Proactive Questions

Describe the three fundamental elements of communities of practice.

While communities of practice have many forms – large and small, local and global, within or across organizational boundaries - they all have three common elements, each of which plays a vital role in the health and success of these communities. When one understands the three fundamentals of communities of practice – domain, community and practice - they are able to better help these groups evolve to their full potential.

- The domain is the specific sphere of knowledge or particular issues that identifies the heartfelt concern of this community. A well-defined domain gives focus and depth to the community and allows the community to be on the leading edge in a particular area of knowledge.
- The community is the people who embody and steward the knowledge in this particular domain. It is “a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment.” (Pg. 34) While each community develops a unique ethos; trust and respect are key elements for any community.
- The Practice entails a shared set of practical resources, protocols, tools, frameworks and ideas that enable the community to perfect and develop their particular craft. “Whereas the domain denotes the topic the community focuses on, the practice is the specific knowledge the community develops, shares and maintains.” (Pg. 29)

Because knowledge with human beings is a complex matter, the head (domain), the heart (community) and the hands (practice) each play a vital role in communities of practice.

In what ways could the church develop communities of practice?

By way of example, let us say that there was an inherent interest, among those who help to lead home groups within a congregation, to share and develop ways in which to cultivate the health and mission of these home groups. In helping to define the domain of this group, they would ask questions like “What are the important elements necessary for a healthy missional home group?” “How does our home group connect to and bring synergy to the congregation as a whole?” “What areas do we need to consider if we want to birth more home groups?” As this group defines their domain, then it would be helpful for them to determine the formal and informal ways for this group to build community, gather information and include new people into the group. As the community is developing, it would be helpful for them to determine which roles people need to take in order to move them toward their common goals. As the community gets larger, it may consider developing more specific domains within the purposes of the home group and birth new communities of practice based on those specific domains. Then from the interactions of these practitioners, in the context of community, they can develop, maintain and share these resources, tools, documents, protocols and stories in such a way to help them to grow in their craft of cultivating healthy missional home groups that reproduce. One could also develop communities of practice that focused on the weekly worship gathering as well as other facets of church life.

What are some practical things to keep in mind when helping form communities of practice? Besides having a good understanding of the three essential elements of communities of practice, one must be aware of

specific challenges at each of the different developmental stages of the group, as well as the common pitfalls and ways to overcome common problems. Consideration needs to be made in how to nurture and organize this organic community in such a way that it keeps a clear focus on its domain as well as develop resources, which practically helps the whole. It is important that communities of practice remember that “embodied expertise” is much richer, complex and dynamic than just “explicit knowledge” and that it requires learning processes such as apprenticeship, coaching and conversation which communities of practice provide. Keeping in mind the nature of five phases involved in fostering communities of practice - prepare, launch, expand, consolidate and transform - as well as the seven design principles - designing for evolution, dialogue between inside and outside perspectives, different levels of participation, public and private spaces, focus on value, familiarity and excitement, and rhythm - will also enable one to form healthy communities of practice.

Summary and Synthesis

While communities of practice do not deliver the “silver bullet” which solves all problems, they have the potential to stimulate new life in any organization as well as across organizations. When communities of practices are cultivated properly, they help to capture and focus the energy, passion and knowledge that people have and steward it in such a way that benefits the whole. Because “embodied expertise” is complex and dynamic, this book is also complex and dynamic in places, and may best be understood by summarizing the various chapters in a page. For each chapter contains important elements and principles that enable one to better cultivate communities of practice that are healthy, balanced and purposeful.

Jack Vinson says

Very good reading that covers the authors' experience and research into communities of practice. There were extensive examples from industry, highlighting various aspects of their approach and thinking.

Ken says

A good introduction CoP with many real life examples to put things into perspective. Wenger lists some of the common problems faced by organisations when trying to set up communities and what are some of the steps that community managers can take to get management support and to strengthen existing communities.

Sam says

There is an interesting and useful idea here, well researched and explained. That's the first 50 pages. The next 200 pages are spent repeatedly beating that same idea into the ground or spinning out ever more complex implementations of the idea. If you have a community that needs an executive support committee, a knowledge management committee, and guidance from a community of community managers, what you have is in no way a community.

Kristin says

Like other reviewers, I found this to be an honest, helpful look at communities of practice. There's great insights, helpful tips, useful terminology and strategy for anyone responsible for cultivation. However, as a reader thinking about COPs in higher education, it also had three frustrating issues. First, as the authors address complexity, interface with the organization and scope, they return to issues we had heard before, but at a new level, making the book seem repetitive with only added nuances towards the end. I'm thinking about a local application so the later parts seemed a bit tedious.

Second, the examples are corporate and solely focused on business gains. I understand there was a previous book that was criticized for not having these business connections. But, for me more diversity in the examples would have been helpful. I'm just not working for these motivations and won't need to make these same arguments.

The last "fault" is my own. I think the book was meant to be a manual, consulted over time as the community evolves and the needs change. I read it cover to cover and didn't fully appreciate some of the chapters given our current status.

One last comment. When I finished the book, I found myself wanting to tear it apart and re-order it. For me, some of the case for COPs was most clear at the end. Yet the early chapters were less effective in positioning COPs in today's reality than I had hoped and I just wanted to get through them to the "good stuff". I think I would have been more energized with some of the later chapters first. The interested reader may want to consider how they go about reading this book. I recommend starting with the parts that sounds interesting and consulting it over time as you encounter new challenges with your COPs.

Chris says

This was Kindle-gifted to me by our communities team at Microsoft, and I found it really practical and full of helpful tips for working with groups with a common technical interest for tasks large and small. There is, as you might imagine, a bit of fluff to explain what I feel to be fairly obvious concepts, but overall the information density and readability was excellent. I was glad I spent the time to read this one.

pandamans says

Cultivating Communities of Practice by Etienne Wenger (2002)

Dalaina May says

Good info, but very business oriented and hard to translate into other situations (like my own). I was bored.

NWP Site Leaders says

With examples and reflections drawn from business consulting, this book provides practical advice

inkeeping with the theory base in communities of practice.

Leanna says

As an introduction to COP, I thought this was extremely clear and very thorough -- covering both the bad and the good of COP and offering examples at the beginning of every chapter as well as concrete suggestions for building COP. However, despite all the thoroughness, I did find it to be somewhat narrowly tailored for the corporate world.

Torben Rasmussen says

This is a great book to read for people working with learning in one for or the other. Especially relevant when working with organisations where it is necessary to facilitate learning across organisational barriers.
