

## Defining a Community of Practice

A community of practice (CoP), or learning community, or learning circle is a group of people who share a common concern, set of problems, or passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.<sup>1, 2</sup> The group can evolve naturally because of the members' common interest in a particular domain or area, or it can be created specifically with the goal of gaining knowledge related to their field. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally.

According to Wenger-Trayner, there are 3 characteristics that define a CoP:

1. **Domain** – defined by a share domain of interest and commitment to this domain
2. **Community** – members pursue shared activities around this domain—share information, discuss topics
3. **The Practice** – members are practitioners with an interest in using CoP experience to improve their practice<sup>3</sup>

## Value of participating in a CoP

- Connect with other IPPs to share experiences and learn from each other
- Offer your expertise and resources to other IPPs
- Learn new ways to approach your work
- Provide opportunity for reflection
- Share resources and tools that can support your implementation and evaluation efforts
- Work with other IPPs to brainstorm data collection and evaluation challenges
- Can help IPPs stay focused and accountable
- Have a forum to discuss emerging issues
- Celebrate each other's successes
- Build and sustain relationships with each other

---

<sup>1</sup> Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, William M. Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Etienne Wenger, "Communities of Practice Learning as a Social System," *Systems Thinker* (June 1998), <http://www.co-il.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shtml>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/07-Brief-introduction-to-communities-of-practice.pdf>

## **Establishing guidelines and expectations**

Guidelines are helpful to provide a framework for how the CoP will be developed and operate through the life of the CoP. Members should drive this process, which means each CoP will be unique, based on member needs. Each group needs to discuss purpose, membership, coordination, and maintenance. The following questions help us think through these key components.

1. What is the purpose of this group? Are there specific goals we want to accomplish?
2. What will membership look like? Who should participate?
3. What do our ground rules look like?
4. How often will we meet and communicate?
5. How should our meeting time be used?
6. Should we have a standard meeting format? What should it include?
7. What topics should we address?
8. What commitments are we willing to make to the CoP?
9. What technology, collaborative tools or other supports do we need?