



## Preserving and Sharing Knowledge and Experience

Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly<sup>1</sup>.

A community of practice is more than a community of interest where people who like certain kinds of things – sailing or music, for example. Members of a community of practice are practitioners and they develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ideas, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. Doing this well takes time and sustained interaction. People may or may not be aware that they are developing a shared practice: a person creating a web resource to collect and share information is aware that they are sharing information with a broader community. Managers meeting for a monthly breakfast may not be aware that the information shared in these discussions are a source of information about how each does their work but through these conversations the shared experiences begin to evolve the practice of the community.

Community Type	Purpose
Best Practice	Develop, validate, codify, index and disseminate proven practices. Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop, review and update policy in a subject matter</li> <li>• Review lessons learned and modify practice as needed</li> <li>• Supporting new workers in the technical area</li> </ul>
Helping	Facilitates informal knowledge sharing, Q&A, mentoring. Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem solving</li> <li>• Reusing assets: sharing documents/designs used for similar purposes on another project</li> <li>• Seeking experience: has anyone dealt with this before?</li> </ul>
Knowledge Stewarding	Collect, select, update, organize, and distribute day-to-day knowledge. Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing requests for information: where do I find....?</li> <li>• Documenting repeated events and solutions (we've faced this five times, let's write this down.</li> <li>• Mapping knowledge and identifying gaps</li> </ul>
Innovation	Foster innovative ideas and practices. Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinating and synergy: "can we combine/streamline our activities to achieve savings or efficiencies</li> <li>• Discussing developments: How can we use this new software product? How is the new process impacting your organization: who knows what and what are we missing? What are the connections between groups?</li> </ul>

## Developing a Community of Practice

*Effective communities continually build, refresh, and sustain the skills, attitudes, values, and knowledge that organizations need to implement their strategic objectives.* <sup>ii</sup>

### **What is a Community of Practice?**

A **Team** brings together individuals with expertise on interdependent tasks that contribute to predefined, shared objective. Their work is focused on producing the deliverable.

**Communities of Practice (CoP)** bring together individuals with shared interest on a topic (a domain). Its members are connected by interdependent knowledge and a commitment to exploring the domain and developing and sharing relevant knowledge about the domain. Community coordinators don't lead in the traditional sense but do enable the community to find its direction and practice. Communities may understand specific tasks or sponsor a tem but the community isn't defined by its task.

### **Elements of a Community of Practice**

**Domain:** The reason for being. The shared interest of the group.

**Community:** The roles individuals and the group are going to play. The structure of the group (frequency, how they will meet...). May include social activities (like unscheduled lunch time) to foster relationships.

**Practice:** The knowledge to be shared, developed, and documented. What competency or sustained capacity to perform do you want to achieve and/or support? What knowledge or resource do you want to develop and maintain? Where is loss of knowledge a risk? What benchmarks/measures document achievement toward WSDOT's strategic goals? Reviewing lessons learned, improving practice. Practices might include: mentoring; storytelling; after-action reviews; mutual problem-solving; or, other activities.

### **Development Steps**

**Planning:** beginning to define the need for a community, engaging management to be supportive, identifying initial members of the community group

**Start Up:** Learning what you can do together. Need for patience: members need value to stay engaged but the community needs time to develop and deliver value. Make a commitment to be aware of this and work through it.

**Growth:** As the community begins to produce, new members may be added. This can change the dynamic. Be aware of the potential for disruption and consciously manage transition. Don't surprise people with unknown expansion and be open to the transition, evolving scope or process.

**Sustainment:** Without continual growth or value, the community can stagnate. Consider how to maintain interest or consciously close the community.

**Closure:** Celebrate successes and bring it to an end.

## Community of Practice Roles

Roles	Considerations
<p><b>Sponsor</b></p> <p>Providing the organizational support for the sponsored community.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May help remove barriers</li> <li>• Make it possible to devote work time to the CoP</li> <li>• Help find resources to support the CoP</li> <li>• Clarifies expectations to incorporate CoP recommendations into practices</li> <li>• Encourages a culture of CoPs across the organization.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Champion</b></p> <p>Providing enthusiasm and energy for organizing the CoP.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourages participation in the CoP and promotes member interaction.</li> <li>• Serve as a cheerleader and advocate for the CoP.</li> <li>• May be one of the initiators of the community</li> <li>• May be a manager or employee that believes the CoP is a primary mechanism for inclusion and managing knowledge across the agency.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Facilitator/ Organizer</b></p> <p>Serving as the primary organizer of events and engagements</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitors and facilitates communications</li> <li>• May be a key partner in resolving challenges and impediments</li> <li>• Responsible for clarifying communications and for coaching and coaxing members to engage</li> <li>• Ensures different points of view are heard and understood</li> <li>• May pose questions and instigate interactions or appreciative inquiry to foster deeper engagement</li> <li>• Provides an environment that members are comfortable with.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Member</b></p> <p>Sharing knowledge, experience, and insights. Most essential role in a CoP.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interact with each other</li> <li>• Participate actively and to engage in situational learning</li> <li>• Participate in exchanges and surfacing knowledge gaps</li> <li>• Establish the common practice, needs and requirements</li> <li>• Represent a broad range of experiences around the practice – it is the diverse perspectives that create and expose knowledge gaps and create opportunities for learning</li> </ul>
<p><b>Practice Leader</b></p> <p>Providing subject matter expertise on the practice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledged leaders in the practice due to competence and true knowledge not due to title, rank or position</li> <li>• Maybe more than one but the community cannot be made up of only practice leaders</li> <li>• Provide important foundational knowledge and lessons learned about the practice</li> <li>• Does facilitate or coordinate– is an important role but not a dominant role</li> <li>• May not be “known” in the early stage of the CoP – they typically emerge.</li> <li>• They cannot be appointed or anointed</li> </ul>

## References and Endnotes

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*Cultivating Communities of Practice*. 2002. Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, & William M. Snyder. Harvard Business School Press.

*The Complete Idiot's Guide to Knowledge Management*. 2002. Melissie Clemmons Rumizen. CWL Publishing Enterprises.

Dr. Denise Bedford, Georgetown University, personal communication about CoP roles.

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<sup>i</sup> *Communities of practice: a brief introduction*. Etienne Wenger, June, 2006.  
([http://www.ewenger.com/theory/communities\\_of\\_practice\\_intro.htm](http://www.ewenger.com/theory/communities_of_practice_intro.htm))

<sup>ii</sup> *Lost Knowledge: Confronting the Threat of an Aging Workforce*. 2004. David DeLong. Oxford University Press.