COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT BRIEFS

These briefs are written to support USAID and partners with Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) throughout the Program Cycle. They utilize experience from the KDMD project to share good practices, how-tos, and lessons learned about concepts and activities related to knowledge management and learning.

The **USAID Knowledge-Driven Microenterprise Development (KDMD) project** designs and implements state-of-the-art knowledge management (KM), learning, and collaboration tools and approaches and promotes collaboration among practitioners to speed innovation and adoption. KDMD seeks to maximize the impact of USAID's knowledge and learning investments, and implements strategies and processes to coordinate learning and knowledge sharing across the full range of investments and activities for our USAID programs.

ABOUT COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

A community of practice (CoP) is a group of people who share a common interest and interact often to learn from each other to advance their work.

A CoP typically has three main characteristics:

- A focus on a topic or subject that establishes the CoP's identity and distinguishes it from other groups
- Engagement of community members
- A repertoire of resources and outputs

Working groups and CoPs are similar, but working groups are usually formed to produce a specific deliverable and may disband when that deliverable has been completed. CoPs, on the other hand, tend to be larger groupings of individuals who come together voluntarily to focus on longer-term goals. While CoPs may have agreed-upon deliverables, they are generally not the primary reason for forming a community.

Why are CoPs useful?

CoPs can be valuable for a number of reasons. They can:

- **Capitalize on different learning styles:** People learn in different ways. CoPs utilize different mechanisms for capturing and sharing tacit (undocumented and informal) and explicit knowledge.
- **Gather collective knowledge:** CoPs help capitalize on the "wisdom of the crowd." Everyone has something to teach and something to learn. CoPs create a space of trust for people to share, assist one another through challenges, and stay current in their field.

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- **Create valuable networks**: CoPs can bring together a network of diverse individuals around a similar interest and provide life-long professional connections that can ultimately stimulate innovative development practice.

Types of collaboration

Communities of practice may exist in person, online, or through a combination of both. Whatever the platform a CoP uses, it should be based on the input of members.

- How would members like to connect with one another?
- How often would they like to engage?
- What are their objectives?

Asking these questions during the initial stages of the CoP helps encourage continuous and long-term participation. The CoP facilitator(s) should also make sure to focus activities and discussion less on the technology/tool and more on the content and objectives.

REQUIREMENTS

Communities' objectives, structure, and members may vary, but successful CoPs typically share the following characteristics:

- ✓ A clear objective decided by and shared among members
- ✓ One or more facilitators to promote participation and model good behavior
- ✓ Member-driven engagement
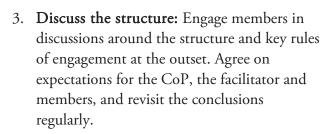- ✓ A clear implementation plan/timeline to achieve agreed-upon results

- ✓ Varied learning activities, tools, and resources to capture and share knowledge
- ✓ A methodology or metrics for evaluating the community's performance and incorporating member feedback
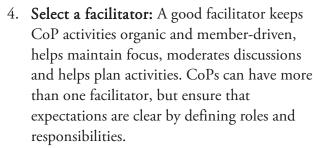
HOW-TOS

The following guidance can be utilized during the three main phases of a CoP.

Phase 1: Planning and start-up

1. **Define goals and objectives**: Before a CoP is created, it is essential to first assess the desire and need to form one. Facilitators as well as a pilot group of members should understand the purpose of the proposed CoP and should work together to agree upon core objectives and goals. What are the short, medium, and long-term objectives of the CoP? Is a CoP the best way to achieve these objectives or are there other ways that this can be accomplished? Keep in mind that unlike a working group, which is more product-driven, CoPs typically have longer life spans and require a longer-term commitment from members.

2. **Target your members:** A large membership is not synonymous with a successful CoP. In fact, CoPs are often largely driven by a small contingent of committed members who regularly contribute to discussions. Think through whether you would like your CoP to be open to anyone or invite-only, as well as what this might mean for the member base that you hope to recruit. Remember that CoP members typically engage with different frequency, so think through different ways to incentivize participation.

3. **Discuss the structure:** Engage members in discussions around the structure and key rules of engagement at the outset. Agree on expectations for the CoP, the facilitator and members, and revisit the conclusions regularly.

4. **Select a facilitator:** A good facilitator keeps CoP activities organic and member-driven, helps maintain focus, moderates discussions and helps plan activities. CoPs can have more than one facilitator, but ensure that expectations are clear by defining roles and responsibilities.

Phase 2: Growing the CoP

5. **Schedule regular activities**: A CoP's activity levels may ebb and flow, but core members and the facilitator should think strategically about how to encourage continued engagement by regularly soliciting feedback from members about the types of activities they would like to engage in.

6. **Build a network and promote community engagement**: Foster a consistent exchange of ideas and support among members. Ask members to share personal and professional experiences, interests, and help to connect people through different outreach strategies. Capitalize on opportunities for in-person engagement since this can help strengthen the CoP by building trust and rapport among members. Scheduling CoP events around conferences or events that members are already attending can be one way to facilitate in-person interaction.

7. **Regularly gather feedback**: Member feedback can help assess how well the CoP is achieving its objectives and how it can improve. Consider different mechanisms for gathering feedback, such as online discussions, surveys, interviews, and open meetings.

8. **Learn and adapt:** Communities of practice are organic and should adapt as necessary to meet member needs. As feedback is gathered, share it back with members and brainstorm possible adjustments.

Phase 3: Winding down

9. **Know when to end**: When communities of practice have served their purpose, members should be engaged in a discussion about bringing the CoP to a close. Before ending the group, finalize deliverables, compile best practices and experiences, share them, and request final feedback. Remember that formally closing a CoP may take time but is an opportunity to bring members together for a final reflection.

LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES

Below are some key lessons learned on forming and managing communities of practice from the KDMD project:

✓ **Spend time on start-up**: Although it is tempting to immediately jump in, it is important to spend ample time assessing the need for and defining the objectives of your CoP. As the CoP grows, refer back to your objectives to help steer the course of activities.

Resources

[Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge - Seven Principles for Cultivating Communities of Practice](#)

[Nickols, Fred (2002). Communities of Practice- A Start-up Kit](#)

Wenger, Etienne and Richard McDermott, and William Snyder (2002) Cultivating communities of practice: a guide to managing knowledge. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press.

[Wenger, Etienne (2001) Supporting communities of practice: a survey of community-oriented technologies](#):

[Knowledge Sharing Toolkit Wiki: Communities of Practice](#)

[Digital Habitats: Stewarding Technology for Communities by Etienne Wegner, Nancy White, and John D. Smith](#)

[Online Community Purpose Checklist by Nancy White](#)

[Communities of Practice: An APQC Overview](#)

✓ **Choose an effective facilitator:** A good facilitator is crucial to a successful CoP. When identifying a facilitator, remember that while technical expertise matters, she/he does not need to provide all of the answers. A good facilitator is a connector between members and should ultimately facilitate linkages among others for knowledge exchange.

✓ **Consider subgroups:** Think about how subgroups will further your objectives and how discussions and resources from the subgroup can be shared with the larger group. Too many subgroups, however, may lead to segregation and lack of engagement among members.

✓ **Celebrate the little wins:** Take some time to celebrate member contributions and CoP activities. Find a place to highlight key contributions and share updates on upcoming activities. Consider [gamification](#) to encourage participation and reward high quality contributors.

✓ **Private vs. public member engagement:** While you want most information to be openly shared, a facilitator should feel comfortable recognizing when interactions should be kept private between members and asking that the discussion be taken offline.