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Leading Successful Virtual Communities of Practice

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The term community of practice (CoP) was coined in the early 1990s to describe "a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis".[1]

As organizations move from hierarchical models to flatter, networked models, organizations are looking for the most effective ways to support greater collaboration across departmental and geographic divides. Virtual CoPs, aided by the latest collaboration technologies, are a great tool for this. They help people who share a common area of practice come together to learn from one another and in doing so, advance individual levels of productivity and performance.

CoPs are distinct from other types of internal groups, such as departments, units and project teams, in that they are self-selecting and have fluid goals around learning rather than strict, management-driven objectives and outputs. While CoPs can take a variety of forms, they are generally positioned within an organization to achieve the following:

▶ Support a continual cycle of learning and doing

▶ Bring together a range of perspectives to address critical challenges

▶ Link people with shared functional expertise across organizational boundaries

▶ Ensure "mission-critical" knowledge is accessible to those who need it

▶ Supporting use of tacit and explicit knowledge through reflection, interpretation and feedback

The current crop of tools for online collaboration and communication make it easier than ever before to run online communities of practice successfully. While in-person interaction, whenever feasible, is especially effective at establishing trust between group members and generating ideas and outputs in a short space of time, virtual collaboration can be a valuable tool if properly

1. Wenger, E., McDermott, R. A., Snyder, W. Cultivating Communities of Practice: a guide to managing knowledge. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University. 2002.

managed. This paper presents a variety of best practices that can be used to drive sustained member engagement in and measure the value of virtual CoPs.

COP FACILITATION GUIDELINES[2]

CoPs can be created for a variety of purposes with their size, structure and management varying accordingly. For any CoP to be successful, however, it must generate value for the host organization(s) as well as for its individual members while striking the right balance between these two sometimes conflicting goals. The following guidelines can help CoP facilitators ensure that their groups remain useful and relevant in the face of ever-changing priorities.

Foster instead of control

▶ Empower members to set the group's goals and objectives (which can change over time) with a focus on group learning rather than simply the fulfillment of tasks

▶ Routinely recognize and thank members for their contributions

▶ Help members move their ideas into wider practice and stimulate their thinking through constructive feedback and challenges

Focus on facilitation

▶ Facilitators should develop their skills and dedicate adequate time and energy to ensuring the group remains active and useful to its members

▶ Where facilitator time is limited, consider using multiple facilitators who can share or rotate this function

▶ Facilitators should model the behavior they would like to see from group members (i.e., lead by example)

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2. Adapted from Hearn, S., and White, N. Communities of practice: linking knowledge, policy and practice. London: Overseas Development Institute. November 2009.

Be responsive to member needs and capacities

▶ Make regular efforts to assess and respond to what members are looking for in terms of value to their work and what they would like to contribute

▶ Identify the capacities of key group members (such as specialized areas of expertise) and encourage them to play a designated role, such as subject matter expert

▶ Send out a semi-annual or annual survey to group members assessing their level of satisfaction with the group and soliciting input on group management, structure, and objectives

Encourage critical thinking

▶ Actively steer members away from "group think" by encouraging dissent and sharing opposing viewpoints, whether personal or from outside sources (such as an article or editorial)

▶ Encourage questioning of the status quo and lively (but constructive and respectful) debate on hot topics of the day

Support two-way learning

▶ Use content that is shared as a centerpiece for active discussion; CoPs are not meant to be solely a means for dissemination of information, but rather an active space of knowledge generation through discussion and peer-to-peer learning

▶ When sharing a piece of content, include one or more provocative questions to encourage discussion on key points

Balance learning and producing

▶ Intersperse production-focused activities (such as the development of guidelines or standards) with more learning-focused activities (such as formulating solutions to a key challenge)

▶ Place equal value on deliverables and "softer" learning exchanges to ensure participation in both streams of activity

METHODS TO INCREASE MEMBER ENGAGEMENT

One of the biggest challenges CoP facilitators face is sustaining member engagement over time. The following are a few approaches that can assist in encouraging active participation by members as well as support from senior leaders and others. *(Note: In addition to these methods, facilitators should routinely assess the CoP's relevance to members and adjust the focus and activities of the group accordingly).*

▶ Hold monthly or bi-monthly calls featuring brief presentations followed by "round-ups" of hot topics related to recent discussions

▶ Send quarterly conversation summaries and/or newsletters to group members and other interested staff (i.e., subscribers)

▶ Invite a "special guest," such as an internal or external expert, to field questions from group members for a limited amount of time

▶ Invite group members with specialized expertise or a recent experience of interest to publish an article or blog post to the community

▶ Hold a challenge or contest to generate ideas or solutions around an issue identified as a priority by the group and allow group members to vote for the best contributions

▶ Establish a "cost-of-membership" model (e.g., each member must document at least one promising/good practice per year or post X amount of questions/responses in order to remain in the group)

▶ Hold an annual in-person meeting where only top CoP contributors or those with accepted presentations can attend

▶ Provide incentives for group contributions, such as non-financial rewards

▶ Formally recognize community membership as part of routine performance evaluations

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MEASURING SUCCESS

CoPs should be routinely monitored to assess their contribution to the organization(s) or initiative. This can be done through measurement of group activity (quantitative) as well as through the active collection of stories and perspectives from group members and others on how the CoP is contributing directly to their work (qualitative). Information gathered should be routinely shared with group members as well as key stakeholders to demonstrate the value of the CoP and drive member engagement as well as stakeholder support. Types of measures that can be used to assess the productivity and value of a CoP include the following:

Quantitative

▶ Total number of questions and/or discussion threads (broken down by member- vs. facilitator-initiated and topic)

▶ Average number of responses per question/discussion

▶ Proportion of questions/discussions that received at least one response

▶ Number of outputs/products produced

▶ Number of resources (e.g., tools, guidelines) shared

Qualitative

▶ Member stories of how knowledge generated through CoP positively impacted their program/project (can be in the form of a written narrative or video clip)

▶ List of promising/good practices shared

▶ List of ideas or innovations shared

▶ Examples of successful peer-to-peer learning exchanges

▶ Member feedback and suggestions on group management gathered through routine surveys

SUMMARY

The key to being a successful virtual CoP leader is a sustained and passionate commitment to the community's health and relevance. Thriving online communities are not built in a day and must always be responsive to the changing needs of members. Putting member needs first will lead to value creation for all.

About Ideal State

Ideal State designs and builds digital workplaces that inspire teams to do their best work. We do this by combining people, processes, and state-of-the-art technology to redefine how people work and learn together.

Visit www.idealstate.co to learn more about our whole-systems approach to solving persistent collaboration, content, and information management-related challenges.

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