TAMARACK INSTITUTE

TOOL | DESIGNING VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

TIME REQUIRED: DESIGN - 2 HOURS

Are you are looking to build connection and capacity across a diverse team in a virtual environment? Developing a Virtual Community of Practice can deepen engagement, build new ideas or provide feedback and evaluation. A virtual environment provides unique opportunities for peer to peer learning.

USING THIS TOOL WILL HELP YOU:

- **Consider how Communities of Practice can leverage technology and a virtual environment to create connections**
- **Understand the key elements which make Communities of Practice successful**
- **Design, prototype and host a Community of Practice**

OVERVIEW

A Community of Practice, Peer Learning Network or Learning Community is an intentional gathering of individuals in a shared learning experience. Communities of Practice can occur within a work team, across work teams, and with individuals who have a shared or common interest. Communities of Practice can be short term and focused on a single idea or topic or they can happen over several months or even several years.

> ***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.***
>
> - **Etienne Wenger**

Effective Communities of Practice focus on three core elements:

- **Domain**: What do we care about? What is the 'it' or focus around which we are gathering?
- **Community**: Who are the people to engage in this Community of Practice? What expectations do we have about their participation and contributions?
- **Practice**: How will we gather? How frequently, what technology, what other practices will we build into our Community of Practice?

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE - THE TOOL

Step 1: Inquire: Determine the interest; value proposition to the prospective members; domain theme of the community; and, leadership.

Step 2: Design: Consider the size and membership of the Community of Practice; the frequency and length of connection; the topics which will be explored; and, the style and structure of interactions.

Step 3: Prototype: Work with your key partners to test the design of the Community of Practice. What is their capacity to engage? What technology considerations must be put into place? What feedback loops need to be built into the design?

Step 4: Launch: Launch the Community of Practice by sending invitations to participants. Ensure a tight agenda with time for connection and engagement. Ensure the event is fun. Share a path forward for the Community of Practice.

Step 5: Grow: Determine how the membership might grow or expand. Consider external speakers and new agenda items. Integrate resources into online content for the participants and/or your organization.

Step 6: Sustain, Renew or Close: Build in evaluation and feedback loops to determine whether the Community of Practice has momentum and should be sustained, renewed or grow after the completion of the initial first phase.

Why a Community of Practice?

- **Create connection and engagement**
- **Develop a shared context and understanding about the domain**
- **Enable ongoing dialogue**
- **Exchange ideas, knowledge, emerging practice in an engaging way**
- **Enhance collaboration across groups**
- **Help groups and individuals coordinate actions**

THE TOOL IN PRACTICE: DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

It is important to understand your goals in supporting a virtual Community of Practice and to make intentional decisions about how the community will be structured to achieve those goals. Consider the following questions:

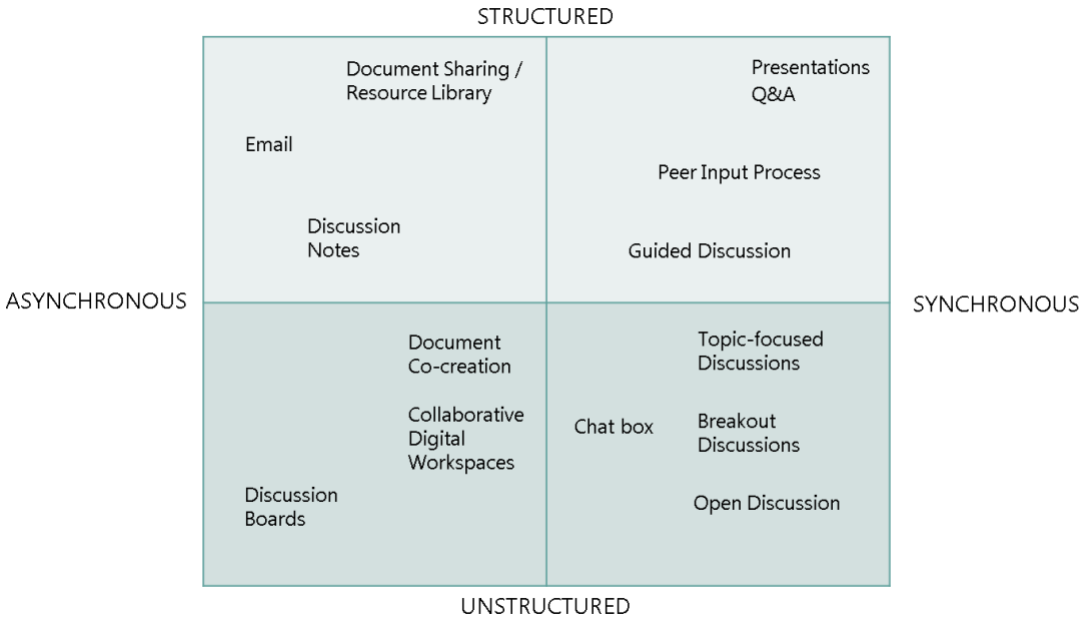
1. **What goals are highest priority?** For example, is it most important for members to build relationships with each other or to learn new skills and thinking? Your goals might change over the course of running a Community of Practice.
2. **How will these goals influence group size?** If relationship building is important, group size will need to be restricted.
3. **What frequency and timing is suitable?** How will this fit into the lives of potential members?
4. **How will members engage within the meetup?** What structures will we use to stimulate learning? How will we foster connection between participants?

Design Considerations

- **Size**
- **Frequency**
- **Learning style**
- **Ownership (who is driving the agenda?)**
- **Degree of structure in interactions**
- **Meetup location and consistent web presence**

5. **What technologies are people already comfortable with?** What are the potential impacts on your Community of Practice members – do they have enough bandwidth; will technology create inclusion or exclusion; and how can you mitigate these challenges?
6. **What might the needs be between meetups?** How will you follow up directly after a meetup? What are the resource sharing needs between members and should you create a space for members to share, ask questions, and connect?

The following chart shows options for the style of structure of a Communities of Practice organized by the degree to which they are structured/unstructured, and whether members connect at the same time (synchronously) or on their own time (asynchronously).



DIVING DEEPER: LESSONS LEARNED FROM VIBRANT COMMUNITIES

Tamarack Institute has been engaging our network and members through Communities of Practice since 2002. While some Communities of Practice have been very successful, others have quickly lost momentum and energy. Below are eight lessons learned about effectively supporting Communities of Practice and peer learners from Vibrant Communities.

8 LESSONS LEARNED

1. Ensure that the Community of Practice creates value for members
2. Look for opportunities to engage members in the design and delivery
3. Set clear expectations about participation
4. Use the meeting to stimulate learning by inviting in external and peer speakers
5. Have a predictable rhythm of meeting times, locations, etc.
6. Reinforce ownership by inviting members to suggest themes and share leadership
7. Seek feedback about the experience
8. Identify a leader to manage the process

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