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### **Description:**

A community of practice (COP) is an informal network of individuals bound together by what they do together and by what they have learned together through their mutual experiences. Individuals that are part of a particular community of practice develop a common sense of purpose and a desire to share knowledge and experience. The concept of a COP reflects what current learning theory indicates: learning is social; learning happens “on the job.”

### **Uses:**

In their simplest forms, communities of practice are everywhere, and have existed for centuries. Recently, however, the emphasis upon communities of practice has emerged in the workplace. Within the workplace, a COP is not merely another kind of organizational unit. Rather, it is much more flexible than that. Membership in a COP is not determined by reporting relationship or an assigned project. Rather, the definition of a COP is more of a permeable, living entity. A COP is different from a team—it is defined by knowledge rather than by task. The life cycle of a COP is determined by the value it provides to its members. Because of the nature of a COP, members can participate in different ways and to different degrees.

### **Materials:**

Flipcharts to record issues and ideas for solutions.

### **Instructions:**

According to Wenger, there are several key components necessary to nurture a COP within an organization:

- Legitimizing participation—creating an environment that gives members the time to participate in activities and which acknowledges the value of the COP for the organization.
- Leveraging existing practices—generally, the knowledge an organization needs is already present in some form, so allow a COP to form to leverage the potential that already exists.
- Fine-tuning the organization—deal with elements in an organizational environment that can foster or inhibit a COP: management interests; reward systems; work processes; corporate culture; company policies, etc.
- Providing support—although COPs are mostly self-sufficient, they can occasionally benefit from some resources: outside experts, travel, meeting facilities, time, etc.

### **Tips:**

Organizations that wish to proclaim that they have a healthy COP cannot just create one out of the blue by some management dictate. COPs form of their own accord.

Don't think that technology can create collaboration. A desire to learn from one another drives a COP, not technology.

Management of an organization should not try to "reward" a COP with formal job to do. The COP needs to do the work it thinks it needs to do.

**References:**

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