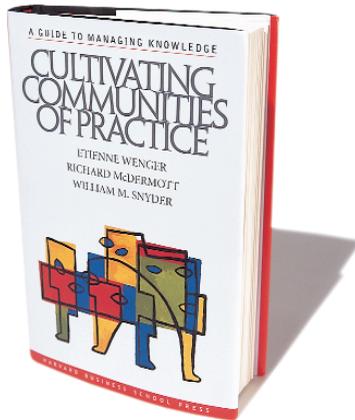




The Magazine for Information Executives

It Takes A Community



Excerpted with permission of Harvard Business School Press. Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge by Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott and William M. Snyder. Copyright 2002 Etienne C. Wenger, Richard McDermott and William M. Snyder. All rights reserved.

Informal groups known as communities of practice are the latest technique for getting employees to share what they know. Here are seven ways to encourage such vibrant communities in your company.

BY ETIENNE WENGER, RICHARD MCDERMOTT
AND WILLIAM M. SNYDER

In Silicon Valley, a community of circuit designers meets for a lively debate about the merits of two different designs developed by one of the participants. Huddling together over the circuit diagrams, they analyze possible faults, discuss issues of efficiency, propose alternatives, tease out each other's assumptions and make the case for their view. Their energy is palpable to both the regular participants and visitors. Although many factors, such as management support or an urgent problem, can inspire a community, nothing can substitute for this sense of aliveness.

How do you design for aliveness? It is different from most organizational design, which traditionally focuses on creating structures,

systems and roles that achieve relatively fixed organizational goals and fit well with other structural elements of the organization. The goal of designing for aliveness is to bring out the community's own internal direction, character and energy.

What is the role of design for a "human institution" that is, by definition, natural, spontaneous and self-directed? How do you guide such an institution to realize itself, to become alive? From our experience we have derived seven principles.

1 Design for Evolution

Because communities of practice are organic, designing them is more a matter of shepherding their evolution than creating them from scratch. As the community grows, new members bring new interests and may pull the focus of the community in different directions. Changes in the organization influence the relative importance of the community and place new demands on it. For example, an IT community that was only marginally important to an organization suddenly became critical as the company discovered the potential of a few e-business pilots.

Community design often involves fewer elements at the beginning than does a traditional organization design. In one case, the coordinator and core members had many ideas of what the community could become. Rather than introduce those ideas to the community as a whole, they started with a very simple structure of regular weekly meetings. They did not capture meeting notes, put up a website or speculate with the group on "where this is going." Their first goal was to draw potential members to the community. Once people were engaged in the topic and had begun to build relationships, the core members began introducing other elements of community structure one at a time.

Physical structures—such as roads and parks—can precipitate the development of a town. Similarly, social and organizational

structures, such as a community coordinator or problem-solving meetings, can precipitate the evolution of a community.

2 Open a Dialogue Between Inside and Outside

Effective community design is built on the collective experience of community members. Only an insider can appreciate the issues at the heart of the domain, the knowledge that is important to share, the challenges his field faces, and the latent potential in emerging ideas and techniques. Only an insider can know who the real players are and their relationships. Good community design requires an understanding of the community's potential to develop and steward knowledge, but it often takes an outside perspective to help members see the possibili-

Good community design requires an understanding of the community's potential to develop and steward knowledge, but it often takes an outside perspective to help members see the possibilities.

ties. It might mean bringing an "outsider" into a dialogue with the community leader and core members as they design the community in order for them to see new possibilities and effectively act as agents of change.

The well-connected leader of a new community on emerging technology was concerned about how to develop the community when many of the prima donnas of the industry were outside his company. When he saw how a similar community in another

organization was structured to involve outside experts in multiple ways, he started rethinking the potential structure of his own community. He realized that the key issues in his community were less about technology and more about the business issues involved in developing the technology. This understanding of the business perspective of the other community gave him a sharper sense of the strategic potential of his own.

3 Invite Different Levels of Participation

People participate in communities for different reasons. We commonly see three main levels of community participation. The first is a small core group of people who actively participate in discussions. As the community matures, this core group takes on much of the community's leadership. But this group is usually rather small, only 10 percent to 15 percent of the whole community.

At the next level outside this core is the active group. These members attend meetings regularly and participate occasionally in the community forums, but without the regularity or intensity of the core group. The active group is also quite small, another 15 percent to 20 percent of the community.

A large portion of community members are peripheral and rarely participate. Instead, they keep to the sidelines, watching the interaction of the core and active members. In a traditional meeting or team, we would discourage such halfhearted involvement, but these peripheral activities are an essential dimension of communities of practice. Indeed, the people on the sidelines often are not as passive as they seem; they gain their own insights from the discussions and put them to good use.

Finally, outside those three main levels are people surrounding the community who are not members but who have an interest in the community, including customers, suppliers and "intellectual neighbors."

The key to good community participation, and a healthy degree of movement

between levels, is to design community activities that allow participants at all levels to feel like full members. Rather than force participation, they make opportunities for semiprivate interaction, whether through private discussion rooms on the community's website, at a community event or in a one-on-one conversation.

4 Develop Public and Private Spaces

Public community events serve a ritualistic as well as a substantive purpose. Through such events, people can tangibly experience being part of the community and see who else participates.

The rhythm of the community is the strongest indicator of its vitality.

However, communities are much more than their calendar of events. The heart of a community is the web of relationships among community members, and much occurs in one-on-one exchanges. Thus, a common mistake in community design is to focus too much on public events. Every phone call, e-mail exchange or problem-solving conversation strengthens the relationships within the community.

When the individual relationships among community members are strong, the events are much richer. Because participants know each other well, they often come to community events with multiple agendas: completing a small group task, thanking someone for an idea, finding someone to help with a problem. In fact, good community events usually allow time for people to network informally.

5 Focus on Value

Value is key to community life because par-

ticipation in most communities is voluntary. But the full value of a community is often not apparent when it is first formed. Moreover, the source of value often changes during the life of the community.

Communities need to create events, activities and relationships that help their potential value emerge and enable them to discover new ways to harvest it—rather than attempting to determine their expected value in advance.

Several months after one community started, it made discussing value part of its monthly teleconferences. Most community members were not able to identify any particular value when these discussions began, even though they all felt participation was useful. Soon, however, one com-

munity member was able to quantify the value his team gained by applying a new technique he learned from a fellow member. Another said the real value of the community was more personal and less quantifiable; he knew whom he could contact when he had a problem.

6 Combine Familiarity and Excitement

Community members can offer advice on a project with no risk of getting entangled in it; they can listen to advice with no obligation to take it. Those are reasons scientists in a pharmaceutical company, driven by urgency to develop new products, see their community as a place to think and consider ideas too “soft” for the development teams.

Vibrant communities also supply divergent thinking and activity. Conferences, fairs and workshops such as these bring the community together in a special way and thus facilitate a different kind of spontaneous

contact between people.

Routine activities provide the stability for relationship-building connections; exciting events provide a sense of common adventure.

7 Create a Rhythm for the Community

Vibrant communities of practice also have a rhythm. At the heart of a community is a web of enduring relationships among members, but the tempo of their interactions is greatly influenced by the rhythm of community events.

A community of library scientists had an annual meeting and a website with a threaded discussion. Not surprisingly, six months after the conference there was very little activity on the Web. An engineering community, on the other hand, held a biweekly teleconference as well as several focused, face-to-face meetings during the year. In this community there is typically a flurry of activity on the website just before and after the teleconferences and meetings.

The rhythm of the community is the strongest indicator of its aliveness. A combination of whole-community and small-group gatherings creates a balance between the thrill of exposure to many different ideas and the comfort of more intimate relationships. A mix of idea-sharing forums and tool-building projects fosters both casual connections and directed community action.

There is no right beat for all communities, and the beat is likely to change as the community evolves. But finding the right rhythm at each stage is key to a community's development. **cio**

Etienne Wenger pioneered “communities of practice” research and is now a globally recognized thought leader in the field. Richard McDermott is president of McDermott Consulting. William M. Snyder consults in the area of organization development.

to·mo·ye

For more information visit www.tomoye.com or call 819-246-9007