

# Communities of Practice

## Pathway to Effective Learning

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A community of practice is a group of people which possesses three main ingredients:

**Domain** - people share an interest in a topic, or issue, and agree on common approaches. It's important to understand the critical *domains* (capabilities) in an organization if we wish to be serious about knowledge and learning.

**Community** - people interact and build relationships. They help one another solve problems and answer questions. Networks are created across teams and business units.

**Practice** - people share and create knowledge through such means as sharing best practices. Knowledge is accumulated over time. People develop tools and create knowledge bases.

#### TEAMS

#### VERSUS

#### COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

*Defined by a **task***

- interdependent sub-tasks
- clear boundaries
- everyone contributes

*Driven by **deliverables***

- shared goals and joint accountability
- team leader or manager

*Bound by **commitment***

- based on workplan and milestones
- developed by achievement

*Defined by a **domain***

- interdependent knowledge
- permeable boundaries
- variable contributions

*Driven by **contribution***

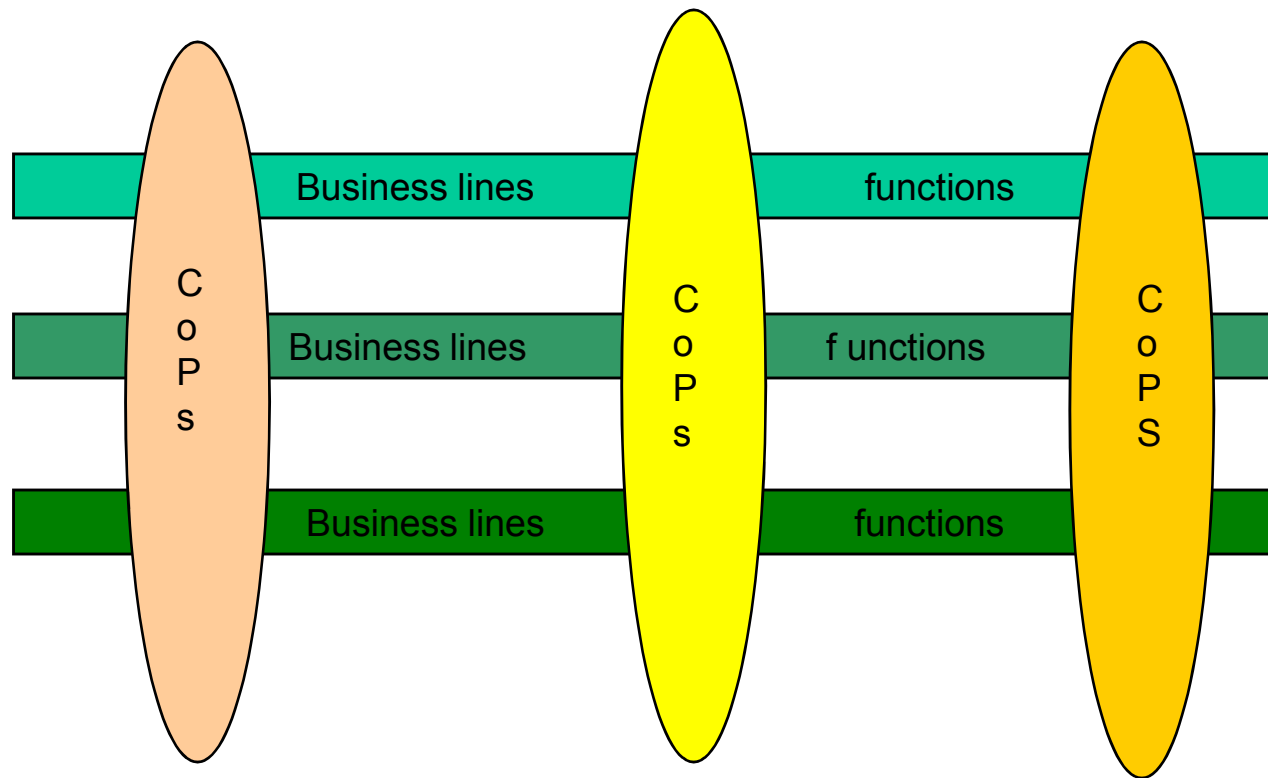
- shared interest

*Bound by **identity***

- based on trust and belonging
- developed by relations

Communities of practices (CoP) help connect people across business lines and functions, and in fact they may be global. They facilitate people working together, building on their individual contributions and seeing the whole system (e.g., organization) and not just its discrete components. A key point is that CoPs bring into play the critical importance of tacit (contextual) knowledge and not just the explicit knowledge that resides in more open, documented forms. A CoP is in effect a peer group, with no reporting relationships. The members operate within their existing organizational structures.

This may be illustrated as follows:



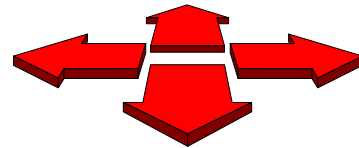
Management plays an important role in communities of practice by expressing and demonstrating its support (such as through the use of champion). This includes allowing the members of a CoP the time to meet periodically. Furthermore, management should play the role of sponsor. This helps to ensure that the CoP remains connected across levels and provides encouragement to build and sustain relationships.

Management has the role of *stewardship* in promoting learning and knowledge creation, and what may be seen as *strategic capabilities*.

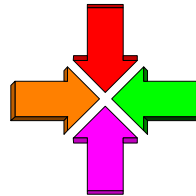


With a community of practice, you want people to join who are enthusiastic and who will contribute actively. This is where the *value creation* occurs, and which further strengthens the identity of the CoP.

Etienne Wenger, an expert on communities of practice, talks about *maximum resonance*. This refers to a CoP that has achieved a broad level of participation on a subject and in which the members benefit from mutual sharing.

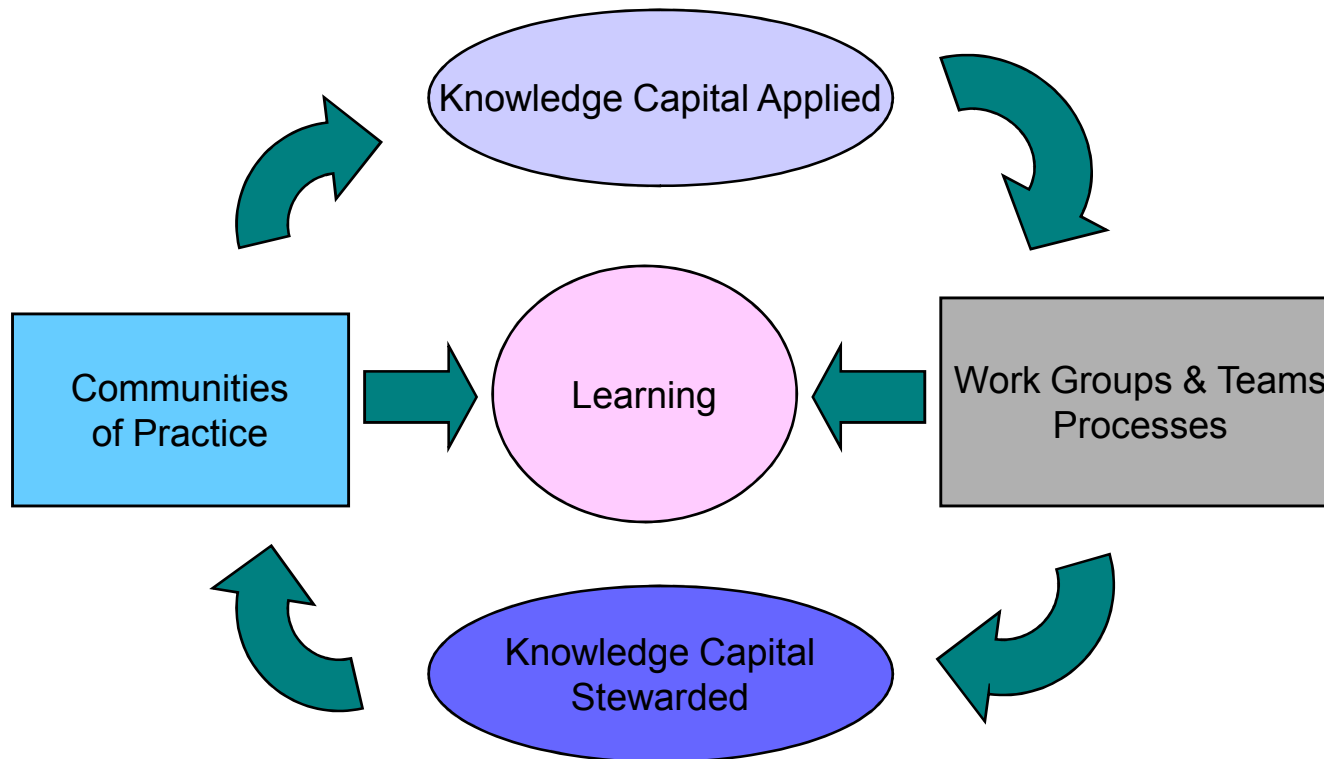


When the subject moves to a more specialized area, the ‘resonance’ narrows. Consequently, the community of practice becomes smaller and more focused. An example is a CoP in automobile manufacturing that will reach maximum resonance when its members share on a broad enough topic.



But when the subject moves into a specialized area, such as braking systems, the CoP shrinks in size to a group that specializes in this. An analogy in the public service sector would be leadership development. The resonance narrows if the topic focuses on something such as 360 degree feedback.

# Wenger's Learning Cycle



There is great value in having structures interwoven with one another. As a 'social container' for learning, teams often don't reap the full benefits of their work and interactions.

The best people to manage knowledge are the *practitioners*. Boundary defines: 1) a CoP's relationship within, and 2) its relationship to the rest of the world.