



Kent, Surrey and Sussex  
Leadership Collaborative



London Leadership Academy

# Communities of Practice for Systems Leadership

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## A Seismic Shift in Our Thinking and Doing.

Today, the NHS and the broader public sector are in the midst of a seismic shift in our understanding of health. The five Year Forward View offers a vision of the future that says a healthy society is built on a health system that seamlessly integrates and links policy and provision of service to patients, people and communities, from acute care to the social determinants of health, and everything in between. This view of how to deliver a healthy society is widely shared, not just in the U.K., but in the West as a whole. However, our current practice of health care is based on a mechanical model, in which it is assumed that if each part of the system operated at high standards of excellence, the outcome of the whole would solve our problems. We know this is insufficient. The parts do not add up to a whole. We need to be working across institutional and professional boundaries, moving

to tilt the dynamic balance of identity from role to whole. An individual institution's success is insufficient in isolation. We need to move the dynamic balance of identity—who we are and what we are trying to do—from role to whole. We need effectiveness, not just efficiency. We need outcomes, not just outputs. We need Systems Leadership.

As we together seek to build the capability and capacity to lead in this new world, we need each other. We need to gather the knowledge, experience, expertise and wisdom that are present everywhere in the system. We need to come together with common purpose to discover the new practices for the future, and the promising practices already underway. Communities of Practice can be a supportive container for this challenge.

## What Are Communities of Practice?

Communities of Practice are not new. They are built on years of observation and research on how adults learn in a work environment. Learning is social. Communities of Practice are the intentional application of how people who care about something that matters learn from and with one another. They are groups of people with a passion for practice, people who share a desire for improvement, or see a problem that they cannot solve alone, or have a solution that will benefit others, and are willing to share their knowledge. CoP's are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they voluntarily interact regularly.

## A Passion for Practice

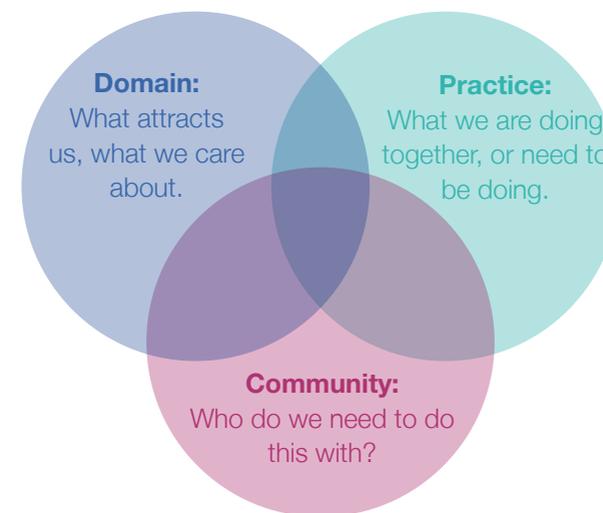
In contrast with more traditional improvement methodologies which tend to be top down driven, micro-metric managed, and locality specific, Communities of Practice are self-organizing, self-managed trans-organisation, collaborative networks. Their members have a passion for a domain of work and are motivated to become better practitioners and committed to helping one another become more effective in what they do. Since people choose their area of focus, develop their own shared learning agenda and their processes for collaboration, energy and sustainability can be enhanced. They create value for their members and stakeholders through the sharing of current practice, and the development and free-flow of new knowledge, practices and capabilities.

Communities of Practice are used as intentional strategies for developing new knowledge and

professional standards in high performing organizations of all kinds, globally. In the NHS, the Yorkshire and Humber Co-Creation Network has been operating a constellation of CoP's in a range of Domains for over a year. McKinsey's professional practice areas are intentional CoP's. Public educators across the United States have sustained CoP's on complex teaching issues. The High-Technology sector uses CoP's as a means to advance professional practice. Energy companies use CoP's to implement strategy across segmented markets. The Grameen Bank as used CoP's to develop the entrepreneurial skills of their micro-loan recipients. Communities of Practice are not new in the NHS. Several are operating in different regions, such as the Co-Creation Network in Yorkshire and Humber, of the South London Health Innovation Network's Patient Safety CoP's.

The cross-boundary nature of CoP's, which operate as peer learning collaboratives, enable them to impact local, situation specific improvements and support system-wide improvements. Because of their inter-professional focus, they provide a conceptual and practical methodology for uncovering the promising practices of the system of health. Furthermore, creating safe places for discussing challenges, experiments and failure advances a culture of learning. The collaborative, peer-based, self-selecting nature of the CoP's can create the depth of trust essential to have the difficult conversations so needed at this time.

## The Elements of a Community of Practice



**The Domain:** An effective Community of Practice is more than just a gathering of friends who share an interest. At the centre of a CoP is a field of concern, a problem that attracts energy, or a possibility for making a difference within an area of expertise. It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership implies a commitment to the

domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from people outside the community. The domain is not necessarily something recognized as “expertise” outside the community. Coping with acute place-based planning processes may not be seen by others as an “expertise.” But those dealing with this challenge value their

collective competence and learn from each other, even though few people outside the group may even recognize the value of expertise.

**The Community:** The domain attracts a group of people who, through regular interaction, communication and support, develop relationships of respect and trust. Through joint activities, sharing information and helping one another, they come to care about their standing with one another. They nurture the social fabric that supports them. They may come from differing professions, institutions and levels, but they learn from and with one another as peers in shared work. The community is usually dynamic, with differing intensity of participation, and membership growing or shrinking. At its core is relationships that matter as much as the content and context they share.

**The Practice:** Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They share a passion for developing the best practice they can. They share a repertoire

of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. Recognizing the practice takes time and sustained interaction. They collect and document the explicit knowledge they share, but also uncover the tacit knowledge and lessons they have learned. They build a knowledge base. Leaders who meet for lunch and share their experiences in working across institutional boundaries may not see that they are in a learning community. Still, in the course of all these conversations, they have developed a set of stories and cases that have become a shared repertoire for their practice.

## Why System Leadership Communities of Practice?

A healthy society is a systems issue, a wicked problem. It is not contained within neat boundaries. As soon as you focus on one particular issue, applying methods to improve it, you realize it connects to more. You may fix the local issue, but not the global one. Solutions for this type of “wicked” problem require Systems Thinking and action as a system. Communities of practice are intended to be boundary-spanning, across organizations, professions, hierarchies and sectors. They access the intelligence that is already in the system and bring that wisdom and expertise to bear on what we are trying to do together. They move identity from the narrow role to what we are trying to do for the whole.

Communities of practice enable practitioners to take collective responsibility for managing the knowledge they need, recognizing

that, given the proper structure, they are in the best position to do this.

Communities among practitioners create a direct link between learning and performance, because the same people participate in communities of practice and in teams and business units.

Practitioners can address the tacit and dynamic aspects of knowledge creation and sharing, as well as the more explicit aspects.

Communities are not limited by formal structures: they create connections among people across organizational and geographic boundaries.

However, the very characteristics that make communities of practice a good fit for stewarding knowledge—autonomy, practitioner-orientation, informality, crossing boundaries—are also

characteristics that make them a challenge for traditional hierarchical organizations, and traditional forms of evaluation.<sup>1</sup>

However, these characteristics and dynamics of CoP's are congruent with the increasing focus on systemic solutions and the Five Year forward View of the NHS.

## Shifting Identity from Role to Whole

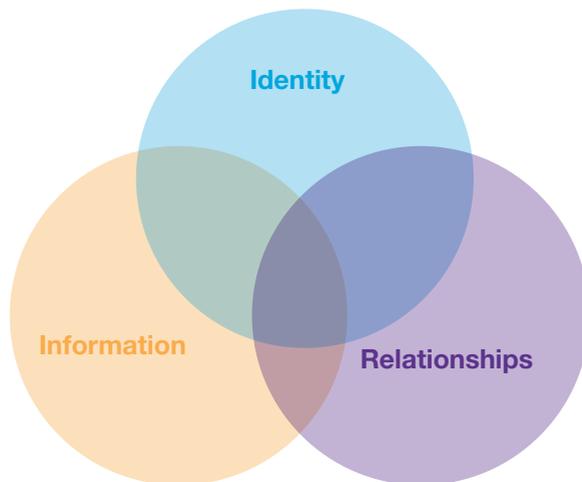
Most change and improvement efforts focus on the phenomena of organizations—the things you can see and touch, like structures, policies and procedures. However, most of what gets done in any system gets done through people who interpret a policy through the lens of their identity, based on what they value and have been valued for, their network of relationships, and the information they have available to them. Most of our organizations are cultures of silos—professional, departmental institutional and expertise-based identities that are fragmented in purpose, meaning and outcomes. These fragmented cultures take up anything presented to them and turn it back into themselves. This is why “Culture eats Strategy” rings true to people. Working at the levels of structure, policy and procedure often generates unintended consequences of the wrong kind.

Structure, policy and procedure do matter, but even more critical are the dynamics of organizing—Identity, Information and Relationships. We create meaning through our identity, and act on that meaning through the information we have. Our freedom to act is a function of the level of mutual trust we hold with those we work with and serve. If our identities are fragmented, or too narrowly role prescribed, we will seek information that confirms our world view, and act in ways that are less than responsive to the complexities of the tasks we face. If our network of relationships is siloed and curtailed, our actions will impact only a small part of a wider challenge, one that requires open and honest conversation with a wider network of people, from multiple perspectives, different experience and varied expertise, so that we may together touch the infinite dimensions of the challenge

1 From Wenger-Trayner.com

before us, and creatively craft a response.

Communities of Practice collaborate across silos and reweave the fragmented parts into a coherent whole system. They help us shift the dynamic balance of our identity from a narrow role toward a broader whole; from what do I need to do to what are we trying to do together.



### Myron's Maxims<sup>2</sup>

These are compressed statements congruent with systems theory and action. They are useful as design criteria for processes and leadership of complex systems.

- People own what they help create.
- Real change takes place in real work.
- Those who do the work do the change.
- Connect the system to more of itself.
- Start anywhere, follow everywhere.

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## Breathing Life into Communities of Practice: A Primer

The life of a Community of Practice can be viewed as a process of maturation, a life-cycle of identifiable but intertwined phases. Over the life of a Community, purpose and identity go through a constant co-creative process of investigation, refinement and even re-framing. Relationships deepen and expand to connecting people from across the system who work as peers in shared work, beyond hierarchy or institutional boundaries. Information evolves from data to meaning, from know-how to knowledge, as people act together in new ways on new ways and develop new practices. But this doesn't happen overnight. While CoP's are very organic—self-managed, self-organizing, self-directed and voluntary—that doesn't mean they occur spontaneously. They need to seed good ground and be cultivated over time. Here's how to get

started, and move through phases of maturity.

## Phase 1: Discovering the Potential.

What's possible here, and who really cares?

– Marvin Weisbord

Find your passion for System Leadership. This is where community begins, with a person or people who have energy and enthusiasm for a particular area of action. The focus of your passion may be on an existing practice, or a problem you see, or an unrealized potential. It's something that calls to you and holds your attention. It's also something you cannot solve alone. The path to changing the outcome—realizing what you are passionate about—requires access to the intelligence, experience, expertise and wisdom that resides within an across institutions, hierarchies, professions and more. So you reach out.

Reach out and invite the Community in. What calls you to this area of concern can call others. Begin conversations with a

few people whose knowledge and capability you value or trust, people you feel might be interested and resourceful. Talk with this initial core group about what you all imagine the focus of the community should be. With this, you can develop a broad description of the Domain. This broad Domain description becomes the basis for an Invitation to a wider group, people anyone in the initial core identifies as a potential community member. Tap into the network of relationships you need, and the passion of those who care about the issues. Come together and spend time further defining the Domain—your field of inquiry, that which calls you together. Discover together what you are trying to do and why you are trying to do it. This can take a while. In fact, the scope and meaning of the domain will evolve overtime as the community gets deeper into the work together.

**Find the practice.** What is the intent the community holds for itself? Is it to help solve everyday work problems; to develop and share best practices, or create and spread better tools and process; or to generate highly innovative solutions and ideas? Or even to change the practice of leadership broadly/ When communities initially come together, they usual have a broad range of intentions. It's important to spend time clarifying the initial focus of the community, what it will begin working on together.

**Create an initial design and work plan.** The initial convener and core group would do well to consider the design of the community. Think about possible ways the community can work together. How often will it meet, when and where? There is a wide range of possibilities, and breaking out of traditional work routines is encouraged. How can you bring life to the meetings? What is the rhythm you need to create? The initial work plan should also consider necessary roles and how

to fulfil them. There is the initial role of the convener, but this role can evolve quite well into co-convener. CoP's need to document their learning. This is a critical role, but can be handled through sharing the duty, recording meetings, or individual journalling. The initial work plan will look carefully at the focus of the community, how it works together, who it works with, and how it captures what it is learning.

These actions continue throughout the life-cycle of a community. Even as the community matures, it continues a reflective dialogue around these questions:

- What are we trying to do?
- How do we need to do it?
- Who needs to do it?
- How will we know we are doing it?

While these practices and conversations remain constant throughout the life of the Community, new and additional

needs and areas of focus come into view at each phase of maturity.

## Phase 2: Coalescing

You cannot force commitment, what you can do... You nudge a little here, inspire a little there, and provide a role model. Your primary influence is the environment you create.

- Peter M. Senge

The key Domain issue at the Coalescing stage is mutually establishing the value of the domain to the system as a whole, so sharing information and knowledge becomes compelling.

For the Community, the key issue is the creation of trust, or at least an opening to it. If the work matters, it will uncover wicked problems, difficult conversations, and perceived personal risks. Trust is essential, yet it is a quality that emerges from our working relationships over time. Communities of Practice rest on a foundation of social and situated learning. How we nurture

trust at this stage of community development is crucial.

The key Practice issue at this phase is an inquiry—what knowledge should be shared, and how shall we share it?

## Phase 3: Maturing

The things you think are disasters in your life are not the disasters really. Almost anything can be turned around: out of every ditch, a path, if you can only see it.

- Bring Up the Bodies  
(Hilary Mantel)

As the community clarifies and coalesces around its focus and establishes the promise of value it holds for the system, new issues arise. This is the point where the community moves from sharing nuggets for knowledge about practice to developing a comprehensive body of knowledge that attracts new people to the community. As the community becomes more visible and credible, time demands become an issue. The key Domain issue for the community becomes re-defining its role in the system, and its relationship to other communities. The Community issue is about the transition from a few networked

professionals to wider boundaries, connecting more broadly across institutions, and tendency to get distracted from the core purpose of the community. Finally, the key Practice issue is the movement to organizing the developing knowledge of the community as an asset for the organization, even as the community begins to recognize what it does not know, and seeks to fill the gaps in knowledge and know-how.

## Phase 4: Stewardship

No institution can possibly survive if it needs geniuses or supermen to manage it. It must be organized in such a way as to be able to get along under a leadership composed of average human beings.

- Peter Drucker

At this phase of community development, a number of issues arise around ownership, sustainability, and energy. If the community has become successful, the demands of the CoP wrestle with the demands of “the day job”. Maintaining aliveness is crucial. The more the community has generated knowledge that is effective, innovative and has spread, the more ownership members are likely to feel over that body of knowledge. They can become stewards of this knowledge for the organization or system as a whole.

At the Stewardship Phase, the key Domain issue is keeping the domain alive and relevant to its members and the broader organization. The Community issue is to keep the quality of the interaction between community member fresh and meaningful. Maybe a rejuvenation meeting is in order, revisiting the energy that brought you there. The important Practice issue is to keep the community on the leading edge of innovation—far from equilibrium. Recruiting new people to the core group, letting people rotate out to less activist roles, can help keep the conversation alive.

## Phase 5: Transformation

A form of free dialogue may well be one of the most effective ways of investigating the crises which face society. Moreover, it may turn out that such a form of free exchange of ideas and information is of fundamental relevance for transforming culture so that creativity can be liberated.

- David Bohm

There is a tension between openness and boundaries. Without boundaries, focus and discipline are diminished. Without openness, ideas wither and grow stale, and the positive disturbance of new information is nowhere to be found. At this mature phase of a Community of Practice, a radical transformation can happen, and it can take many forms. Some communities simply fade into the background, their legacy an artifact of a toolkit or a website presence. Good work done, and then energy faded, and people

moved on. This can be a healthy transformation—if it is deliberate. Sometimes a community will evolve into several communities, as they identify new domains or practice areas. Or they may merge with another community whose work is similar. Occasionally, a community will have generated enough successful innovation and knowledge development, that it becomes institutionalized, as a prized knowledge hub.

From here onward—

## Further reading:

Etienne Wenger, partnering with others, has been the leading researcher and developer of Communities of Practice over the course of decades. Some of his useful publications are:

Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott and William M. Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge* (Harvard Business School Press, Boston, 2002).

Etienne Wenger and William M. Snyder, *Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier* (Harvard Business Review, January-February, 2000).

An adjacent and compatible set of ideas can be found in *A Simpler Way* Margaret J. Wheatley and Myron Rogers. (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco). The book describes a systems view of organization and organizing.

