

SEVEN STEPS TO BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

A community of practice (CoP) is commonly referred to as a collection of people who share mutual concerns, challenges or an interest in certain topics. The primary objectives for creating a Community of Practice are to share best practices and create knowledge to advance the community's sphere of influence.

Without the creation of or participation in a CoP, you are missing a critical opportunity to learn, engage and make an impact as a nonprofit leader. Leveraging your nonprofit's brand to expand your sphere of influence is critical and important collateral. Consider the following: If you need allies to help change policy, you need a CoP. If you require additional capacity to solidify your vision, you need a CoP. Conversely, if you need innovative solutions to help your constituencies thrive, you need a CoP. What about amplifying specific messages or inviting other leaders in your sector to support your mutually beneficial strategy? If you answered yes to any of these, then **You. Need. A. CoP.**

Using a solid framework is critical. Onyx Strategies Group devised a basic framework to help non-profit leaders think about a methodology for community engagement and thus building a Community of Practice over time. There is no "one-size fits-all" approach. Every "community" has its own nuances, culture and dynamics. However, this simplistic framework demonstrates the critical scaffolding needed to begin the journey for working in a productive and effective manner.



1. **Define the Community:** Members in the Community of Practice engage in joint activities and conversations. They often help each other in a particular area or interest and share that knowledge. The definition of community is not straightforward and can be complex. According

to *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, “community is not a place, a building, or an organization; nor is it an exchange of information over the Internet. Community is both a feeling and a set of relationships among people. Members of a community have a sense of trust, belonging, safety, and caring for each other...” Define your community based on your nonprofit’s purpose and the ecosystem with which they exist and the constituents they serve.

2. **Assess the Community and Analyze Data:** If you haven’t clearly described the people and conditions in the community, it’s history, what matters to them and their stakeholders, you will need to gather this evidence before engaging with potential community members. You should also consider if you’ve gathered or reviewed evidence about potentially important challenges or goals for the community, uncovered the needs related to those challenges, discovered the community’s assets and how those will help build your potential Community of Practice.
3. **Engage Stakeholders & Set Mutual Goals:** Initially seek out members within your community with similar purpose and help them understand why you want to build a Practice. To ensure a successful start, initially engage with members of your community with whom you have strong relationships/partnerships, operations and cultures.

While the nascent community begins to take shape, begin to engage, build relationships and trust with other stakeholders with whom you wish to be in community. Demonstrating your vulnerability and new ideas for why they are important to the Practice is essential. Let them know the relationship will be mutually beneficial as their participation can help bring new proposals, resources, important voices and thought partnership to the community.

In defining mutual goals, determine your community’s north star – what is the outcome(s) you wish to seek? Are their critical voices missing in the community? Are there significant disparities? Make your early goals attainable to set the Practice up for success.

4. **Prioritize Opportunities and Challenges:** Ask yourself a few critical questions. Do you have sector credibility to build a Community of Practice? Does your organization have a history of *not being inclusive, equitable, transparent or “closed off”* from others outside of your immediate sphere of influence? If so – those tensions and challenges will need to be addressed before inviting others to be in community with you.

Does your organization have at least two people on staff that will be dedicated to building, operating and managing the Practice? Is what you want to achieve attractive enough to internal and external stakeholders? Do you have funding or the ability to attract funding to productively manage the Practice and provide essential technical assistance and resources? If you’re unsure about any of the above, Onyx Strategies Group recommends the implementation of a SWOT analysis to get an unbiased determination about your capacity to build and sustain a successful community of practice.

5. **Ideate Strategies re the Structure of Practice:** In this phase, determine how the Practice will govern itself. Are there any legal frameworks to consider? Who will be the decision-making authorities and what or who will they be accountable to (i.e. will this be governed by an internal and external steering committee, will it include funders or will this solely be a Practice governed by the initiating organization – what are the pros and cons of non-collaborative leadership)?

Will community members have to pay to participate? Will the Practice need to be incubated within your organization or elsewhere? How will the community settle disputes or manage difficult, or uncomfortable issue/sector related challenges and interpersonal dynamics?

6. **Plan and Implement Community of Practice Strategies:** Now that the operations and infrastructure have been established, determine how you will impart shared learning among the Practice (i.e. affinity groups, leadership institutes, special events or conferences). Consider capacity building grants for community members to help the Practice reach stated goals and objectives. Draft and submit annual reports on the state of the Practice, highlighting trends in the sector and beyond.

This is a short list of considerations your Practice can make as it determines the kind of activities and technical assistance support it wants to administer to build a healthy and strong community in support of a particular sector.

7. **Evaluate & Modify the Approach Where Necessary:** The community will need to adapt to changing conditions, renew itself and “test-pilot” initiatives that help the community reach its goals. Ensure that your community of practice is resilient against the lack of inclusivity and diversity. Be sure to plan for the sudden loss of funding, the resignation of charismatic leadership and meeting burnout. Modify outmoded approaches to technical assistance support and resources. Look for any implicit bias in Practice governance and ensure that modes of communication are consistent and transparent. Do everything you can to ensure the “health and wellbeing” of the Practice through consistent evaluation, communication and the inclusion of case statements that evoke an emotional and urgent plea.

If the Practice is not consistently meeting its benchmarks and is overrun with micromanagement and complicated governance, consider a pause in the “action” and conduct a “post-mortem” analysis. Share the findings with the community and determine if they would like to reengage based on the learnings. If so, move forward cautiously and transparently and follow the recommendations outlined in the analysis to ensure success the second time around.