



COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

A how-to model for building social learning spaces

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A Community of Practice (CoP) is a high-value, low-cost initiative to connect people with a passion for learning, developing, and growing together related to their practice.

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Coaching Association of Canada
Association canadienne des entraîneurs



Who is this model for?

The following is a model which provides sport organizations with a step-by-step approach to plan, train, design, implement, assess, and maintain a Community of Practice focused on supporting long-term change. The model is research-based and informed by previous experiences with many CoPs. For further information about our experiences, please see the author biographies below.

This model is for any organization implementing an initiative to support collective learning. Whether that learning is centred on supporting professional development, advancing women's leadership capacities in sport, or developing the learning capabilities of parasport coaches, this model will suggest tips, questions to consider, and will guide you through the process.





What is a Community of Practice (CoP)?

The concept of CoPs was developed by Etienne Wenger-Trayner and explored in his 1998 text *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. In summary, CoPs are defined as groups of “people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002, p. 4). According to Wenger (1998), social interactions play an important role in our learning because we are all fundamentally social beings. By actively participating in interactions with others to solve a problem or explore a passion, we are meaningfully engaging with the world and creating new knowledge.



Why develop a Community of Practice?



CoPs can be low cost-high impact interventions supporting learning and change across a variety of contexts and professions. They have facilitated professional development, ongoing learning opportunities, and knowledge sharing in fields such as education¹, healthcare², and sport³.

1. Akerson, Cullen, & Hanson, 2009; Culver, Kraft, & Movall, 2019
2. Ranmuthugala, Plumb, Cunningham, Georgiou, Westbrook, & Braithwaite, 2011
3. Bertram, Culver, & Gilbert, 2017; Stoszowski & Collins, 2017



The Coaching Association of Canada's experience hosting a CoP

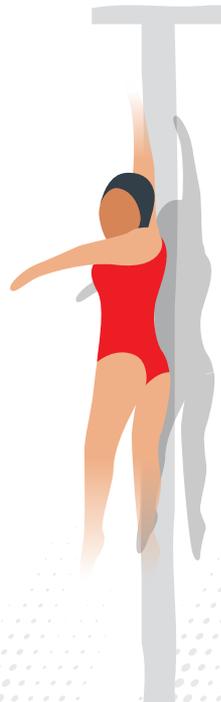
In 2017, the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) received funding from the federal government (Women and Gender Equality; WAGE) to develop a program to increase gender equity and leadership diversity across sport organizations titled the Alberta Women in Sport Leadership Impact Program. The program supported organizational representatives who had a passion and interest in advancing gender equity and developed projects to support girls and women's participation in sport and leadership development. The projects focused on increasing leadership diversity through policy, practices, increasing the pool of female coaches, coach developers, athletes, participants, volunteers, board members and officials.

Sport organizations in Alberta applied to participate in the program to advance gender equity by submitting proposals to increase the participation and leadership abilities of girls and women. The application required the organization to provide the gender data and a description of their project. Projects included:

- launching a mentorship program,
- approval of policies supporting female coaches for female teams,
- free coaching workshops for people identifying as female,
- female coach developers programs and female officials development, and,
- researching the impact of their female programs to determine impact and make improvements.

Fifteen sport leaders were accepted and participated in this project (throughout the project, three sport leaders discontinued their participation for various reasons). In addition to the sport leaders, the CoP consisted of one facilitator, five mentors, and two researchers.

The purpose of the CoP was to bring the CoP members together to participate in professional development opportunities (e.g., workshops on gender bias) to develop the leadership capacities of the entire community. Additionally, this CoP created a space where the sport leaders were supported in the execution of their projects.





Alberta Women in Sport Leadership Impact Program CoP



Specific roles within the CoP:

COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Depending on the nature of an organizations' CoP, the community members may not come from specific groups. Below we describe the community members of the Alberta Women in Sport Leadership Impact program.

FACILITATORS:

The individual(s) often responsible for initiating the CoP and facilitating the initiative. As is often the case, the overall focus of the CoP was often put forth by the facilitator, who then helped the CoP members negotiate the specific topics and activities.

SPORT LEADERS:

The sport leaders were individuals from various sport organizations who joined the CoP with specific project plans.

MENTORS:

Individuals who participated in the planning and delivering of content during CoP meetings. They also supported the sport leaders in achieving their project goals.

PODS

Each mentor was assigned to approximately three sport leaders to engage in small group and 1:1 interactions to further support the sport leaders in achieving their goals. If the mentor role is not being used, the CoP members may choose to divide into smaller groups for certain activities, or exclusively meet as a whole community.

It is important to note that many CoPs do not have mentors or pods, and can be implemented within one organization. In this case of the CAC program, this was an effective addition to the ongoing learning and development of the group, due to the added requirement of each community members completing a unique project.

Based on the experience of the Alberta Women in Sport Leadership Impact Program participants, the CAC and research partners have developed a model to guide organizations in establishing their own Community of Practice. The model and considerations identified below are relevant to an organization or an individual that would like to host a CoP.





HOW TO SET-UP A CoP



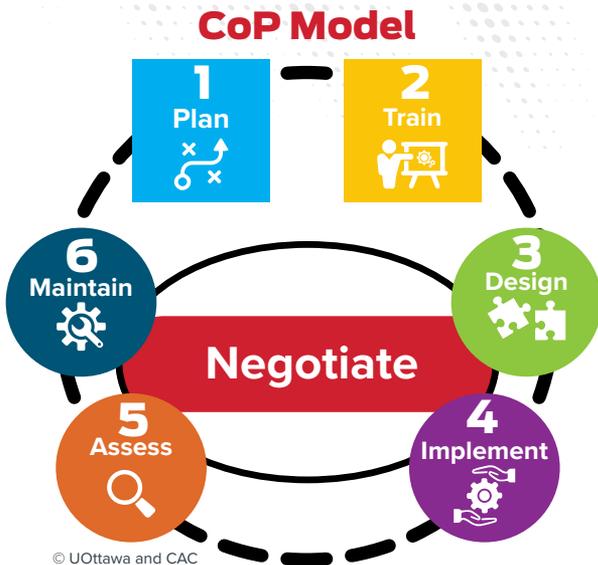
STEP BY STEP GUIDE AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR ESTABLISHING A CoP

CoPs promote constant negotiation and re-negotiation of activities depending on the needs of the community members. Uncertainty in CoPs is a positive experience because community members are co-creating knowledge to go where they have not gone before in terms of their practice.



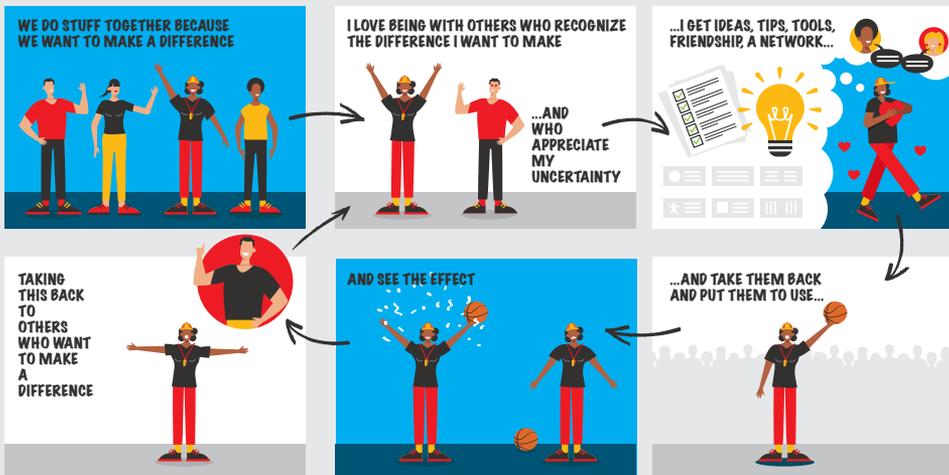
Communities of Practice

It is important to note that although these steps are in an order, CoPs are constantly changing and evolving, so these steps may overlap or may need to be revisited on more than one occasion. PLAN and TRAIN are preliminary steps, which occasionally may need to be revisited. The regular cycle of the CoP comprises DESIGN, IMPLEMENT, ASSESS, MAINTAIN, and then back to DESIGN. Negotiation is an ongoing process.



What CoP members will do and experience

The cartoon below shows the CoP member experience and the cycle between the collective work within the CoP and the individuals' implementation of what they take away from the CoP and subsequently bring back to the CoP. The four core values (immediate, potential, applied, and realized) of the Value Creation Framework (VCF) depicted below are portrayed in boxes 2, 3, 4, and 5 of the cartoon.





Value Creation Framework

The Value Creation Framework (VCF) can be used to frame and assess learning value in CoPs and other social learning spaces. Framing encompasses planning, designing, and more in the sense that framing is an ongoing process rather than something that occurs before learning. In this way, CoP activities are always framed by the aspirations of the members and stakeholders. The questions on the VCF figure are related to the different value cycles and should be visited at the time the CoP is first conceived, and revisited as the CoP evolves.

“Value here refers to importance, worth, or usefulness rather than moral standards, even if the two are related” (Wenger-Trayner, et al., 2019, p. 323). Value can move across the different value cycles from immediate to realized and transformative, supported by enabling and strategic value. However, it does not always move through each cycle and at times will hit a dead end at which point the community members will have to circle back and reframe the approach.

What is the quality of engagement with strategic stakeholders?

ORIENTING

 **STRATEGIC**

Does the difference you make have broader effects?

TRANSFORMATIVE

What is the experience like?

IMMEDIATE

POTENTIAL

What comes out of it?

What difference does it make?

APPLIED

REALIZED

What are you learning in applying it?

What else is potentially relevant?

 **ENABLING**

What makes it possible?

Wenger-Trayner.com

How to use the VCF

- » Before: Consider the aspirations of the various different stakeholders you are trying to involve in the CoP. The VCF questions guide your strategic conversations and the ‘Plan’ stage.
- » During: Consider the different value cycles when designing and implementing activities, and to maintain alignment in terms of community members’ and stakeholders’ goals and learning needs.
- » During and after: The VCF guides the data you will generate within the CoP, and collect from stakeholders for the assessment of value created.



PLAN



Plan with
CoP members,
topics, roles, and
overall goals



>>> PLAN



Develop CoP focus and messaging for engaging community members

- » What will be the focus, topic, problem to solve, common passion or interest that will engage community members to participate in the CoP
- » **For example:** coaching innovations, developing effective communication skills, mentoring, increasing gender equity, develop leadership skills, enhance cultural competencies, deepen understanding of inclusion and diversity



Invite or select community members



- » Based on the focus of the CoP, who needs to be in the CoP
- » Membership is usually self-selected depending on the focus



Develop a call for participation



- » Who do you want in your CoP
- » Where will you advertise for this opportunity



Determine roles

- » Who will facilitate the CoP
- » Who will be designated to assist with logistics (e.g., booking meeting spaces, travel arrangements if necessary)
- » Determine if a mentor role is needed, or pods
- » If mentors or other CoP leaders are to be set in place, consider what leadership skills you are looking for



Determine appropriate platforms

- » Determine an appropriate platform(s) to stay connected e.g. D2L, Slack, WhatsApp, Adobe Connect, Facebook Group or Workplace, other



Financial planning

- » Are there funding opportunities or grants to assist with this project
- » Are there stakeholders who may want to invest in this initiative, if so, will this impact the target outcomes of the CoP
- » Will an organization be supporting the community member's participation
- » Decide who needs to approach potential funders





TRAIN



To train or
not to train



>>> TRAIN

Develop a training plan



- » Will an outside party be contracted to train the facilitator(s)
- » Will other community members receive training



Distribute leadership roles

- » Determine mentor roles and distribute leadership (e.g., one mentor may be responsible for taking meeting minutes, mentors may each be responsible for developing a meeting agenda on a rotating basis).
- » These roles may also be distributed to the other community members



Continue learning through observations and discussions

- » Community members or mentors (if applicable) may also be encouraged to informally engage in conversations with each other outside of these meetings.
- » How often will the mentors meet to learn from each other (e.g., troubleshoot concerns)



Negotiation of leadership roles (facilitator, mentors, other members)

- » Will there only be one facilitator
- » Facilitator and other group member leadership roles should be negotiated with all CoP members
- » Will leadership roles be changed once a month on regular basis
- » Perhaps mentors or other leaders can lead activities in their area of expertise? Or based on the needs of the CoP





NEGOTIATE



CoPs are in constant negotiation depending on the changing needs of the members



NEGOTIATE



Community member-driven

In the case of the CAC, the CoP meetings, workshops, and other content were all community member-driven, as there was a shared learning imperative – to advance gender equity and leadership diversity. As the needs of the community members changed over a two-year period, so did the CoP content. It is important to remember that CoPs are always in flux and roles/content are in constant negotiation.



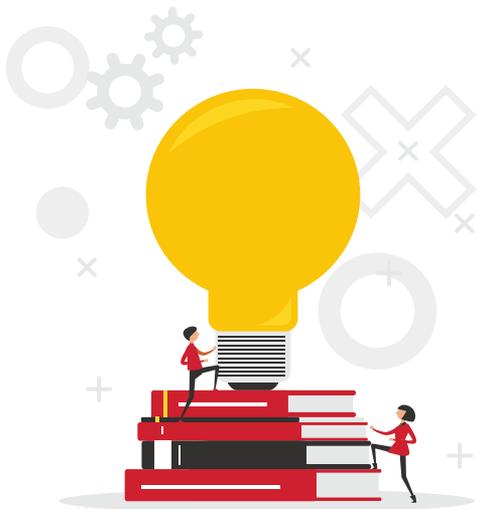
Find out what makes people “lean-in”

As mentioned above, collecting stories and checking in with the community members will help determine what is encouraging people to lean in and what needs to be changed to cultivate a meaningful social learning space.



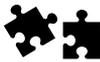
Optional activities (leadership legacy)

Consider providing supplementary training and courses where community members are able to engage in activities in the service of achieving their goals (e.g., additional leadership development activities). By offering these optional opt-ins, CoP members have the chance to engage in other activities and make connections with others in the CoPs.



Negotiation of collective learning goals, activities, assessments, and techniques all involve constant negotiation in the CoP





DESIGN



Design the first CoP meeting and determining how it will flow moving forward



DESIGN

*In the CoP literature by Wenger-Trayner, the term frame is used to describe planning and designing.

We recommend an initial in-person meeting with the entire CoP to foster a trusting environment and to determine online meeting tools

- » Where will this meeting take place
- » Could it be paired with another event to minimize travel costs
- » Who will prepare the agenda and meeting content
- » What are the goals for this CoP (e.g., asking the community what they want out of this social learning initiative). What is the driving learning imperative?
- » How will you establish trust and a feeling of equity among the community members (ground rules)



Discuss expectations and accountability



Be clear with participation expectations for all community members

- » How often will the entire CoP meet - in-person or online?
- » Are the community members expected to come to every in-person or online meeting
- » Will members be asked to speak at every meeting
- » Will there be optional activities and workshops



Integrate deliberate opportunities for engagement and knowledge transfer (within the community)

- » Will the community members be asked to present the progress of their goals at every meeting
- » Updates may help the community members troubleshoot issues and share their ongoing experiences to support other goals



Distribute leadership roles (other community members)

- » Will some community members have the opportunity to take on additional leadership tasks
- » What tasks might they be
- » Visit the Wenger-Trayner.com website for a list of leadership roles specifically developed for CoPs

Integrate deliberate opportunities for engagement and knowledge transfer (outside of the community)

- » Could the community members present their projects/goals at conferences, summits, competitions or other events

This will allow the community members to spread the word about their projects/ goals and receive feedback from the wider sport community



Select an appropriate online meeting platform to support ongoing interactions

- » Technology will deeply enrich or alienate members
- » Engage members when selecting, introducing and supporting software platform(s)
- » It must be safe to learn technology and receive support on how to use it and what is needed, before leaving the first in-person meeting



Examples of online platforms that could be used:

- » Discussion boards may include Slack or Basecamp
- » Voice or video interactions may include Zoom, Adobe, Skype (paid and unpaid versions are available)



IMPLEMENT



Implement
ongoing CoP
activities





IMPLEMENT



Division of Pods and determining their purpose

We recommend getting to know everyone first to make an informed decision of who may work well together

- » How will the mentors and other community members be divided into pods - if pods are used
- » Will this division consider common interests or goals
- » How often will the pods meet
- » Will the mentors also meet with the other community members 1:1
- » What is the purpose of the pod meeting (e.g., open discussions, specific agendas)

Even if there is no specific agenda, the community members found regular meetings were important for maintaining engagement and accountability on their ends to keep moving forward with their projects/goals, despite facing obstacles and barriers.



Cultivate a feeling of equity

- » How will the facilitator and/or mentors maintain a feeling of equity and support among all CoP members

Create strategic alignment in the sport organizations

The community members' organizations may be an important support in the execution of their projects/goals, or a considerable barrier. Therefore, it is important that the (sport) organizations are buying in to the importance of the projects/goals and CoP.

- » How will you create this buy-in?



Continuous check-ins (what is keeping members engaged?)

It is important to keep a finger on the pulse of the CoP. One way of checking-in is by collecting stories (to be further discussed in the next section)

- » Are the workshops useful for the members
- » Are the pod meetings effective in supporting the needs of the CoP members

A simple check-out activity at the end of meetings may also inform future activities. For example, having each CoP member fill out a card with the questions:

- » What is one thing you took away from the meeting?
- » What would you like to see at our next meeting?





ASSESS

Assess the CoP
outcomes and
value of social
learning



ASSESS



Train community members to assess for outcomes

In our case, the community members participated in a workshop and were provided with tools to conduct their own small-scale assessments of their projects (e.g., how to use a logic model). This enabled the community members to provide their organizations and the CoP with the results of their projects. Assessment resources can often be found online, or an individual could be contracted to facilitate a session.



Value Creation to assess CoPs

It may be necessary to hire an external party to conduct an assessment of the CoP to determine the perceived value created through the social learning intervention (from the perspective of the CoP members) and the achievement of the target outcomes. In our case, data was largely collected through interviews with the CoP members where they discussed their stories and experiences participating in the CoP and carrying out their projects/goals. The theorists behind CoPs (Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner) and their colleagues have developed templates to collect stories and assess for value creation. For those interested in learning more about this assessment tool, we welcome you to visit their website (www.wenger-trayner.com) for tools and information.

- » In addition to interviews, other forms of data collection may include observations and the collection of the community members organizational data to monitor change (e.g., number of female head coaches from 2018-2019).



MAINTAIN



Maintain the
momentum
of a CoP
long-term



>>>

MAINTAIN



Develop a legacy plan



- » How will the CoP members continue to engage once the program ends (if the program has a specific funding period)



- » How will the CoP continue once the projects/goals are completed

Consider asking the community members about their future needs and redistribute leadership roles accordingly



Apply for grants/other long-term funding

One of the workshops in our Alberta CoP was centred on funding and grants. Although it is not necessary to have funding for any aspect of the social learning, it does help for instance for travel costs and to adequately assess outcomes.

In addition, some community members have secured internal funding from their organizations to maintain their projects/plans/goals beyond the original timeframe because of the impacts of their initiatives – another key reason to create buy-in with the organizations.



Concluding remarks

We hope this step-by-step model provides you, your organizations or the people in your community, with a guide to develop a low cost-high impact social learning initiative that is relevant to your contexts. With the many methods out there today for people to connect (in-person/online), CoPs provide a flexible space to cultivate long-term change among groups of people who are passionate about developing their practices and continued growth. While the model is presented as a multi-organizational approach to learning and changing practices, this model can be easily used in any single organization.



Establish partnerships

Some of the CoP members developed collaborative plans with their sport organizations to maintain their projects/goals (e.g., two sports have developed an annual conference for women in sport leadership)

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About the Authors

Erin Kraft is a doctoral candidate in the School of Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa. As a former swim coach with over 10 years of experience, Erin primarily coached children with developmental disabilities. She holds a master's in education where she examined coaches' experiences teaching children with Autism Spectrum Disorders in aquatic programs. More recently, Erin's research interests have shifted and focus on developing social learning spaces, as an approach to facilitate learning opportunities in sport. Her doctoral research uses these social learning spaces to increase gender equity and leadership diversity across sport, and to expand the learning capabilities of Canadian Parasport coaches.

Diane Culver is an Associate Professor in the School of Human Kinetics, University of Ottawa. Her research interests include coach development and qualitative research. She is currently funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to research Parasport coaching, and women in sport organizations. In her teaching, research, and consulting she is particularly interested in social learning theory and building social learning capability in sport. Diane is also an alpine ski coach who has worked with all levels of skiers from youth to Olympic levels. She now coaches masters skiers and mentors youth coaches.

Isabelle Cayer, a graduate of the University of Ottawa, is the project lead for the Alberta Women in Sport Leadership Impact Program. She is the Director, Sport Safety at the Coaching Association of Canada and provides leadership and expertise in the areas of Safe Sport, Professional Coaching, and the Responsible Coaching Movement. She leads the development of programs and initiatives in Women in Coaching including mentorship and apprenticeships, research, policy work, and raises awareness of the importance of diversity and inclusion within the sport community in Canada. An NCCP certified former figure skating coach, she currently contributes to coach development as a learning facilitator and Master Coach Developer for the Coaches Association of Ontario, and as a Women and Leadership Facilitator for Canadian Women and Sport.

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About the Coaching Association of Canada

The Coaching Association of Canada unites stakeholders and partners in its commitment to raising the skills and stature of coaches, and ultimately expanding their reach and influence. Through its programs, the CAC empowers coaches with knowledge and skills, promotes ethics, fosters positive attitudes, builds competence, and increases the credibility and recognition of coaches. Learn more at www.coach.ca.

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- Jasen Pratt, Karate Alberta
- Bronwen Harvey, Ringette Alberta
- Ella Mayer, InMotion Network
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- Carmen Charron, Alberta Soccer Association
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The logo for coach.ca, featuring a stylized white bird or flame shape above the text "coach.ca" in a bold, lowercase font.

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