

How to start a CoP?

Every CoP has its own history, milestones, highlights and pitfalls. Knowing this history is a key to understanding the nature and the development potential of a CoP. Like every organisational form, a CoP has a life cycle and goes through different stages – from its creation to its phasing out.

	Phases	Associated metaphors
1	Express your need to interact with peers: I know – you know – we together might know better!	Germination Creation
2	Start a discussion of a domain in a core group and discover a common interest in this interaction. Dare introducing new forms of sharing experience. Encourage others!	Inspiration Budding stage
3	Contact potentially interested people by phone, by mail, and in informal talks during workshops and gatherings. Attract their attention and awake their interest. Involve them in a first small and useful interaction. Let them feel the possible benefits.	Growth Flowering
4	Design the interaction in terms of time and place: Contributions in journals, discussions in electronic platforms, and meetings. Pay attention to early, intermediate results, summaries and conclusions of discussions. Assure the flow of the process; assure added value for all participants. Motivate individuals through backchannel contacts. Organize the core group (owner, convenor, facilitator, experts) and take care of the inner and the outer circle.	Adventure group Starting an expedition
5	Organize workshops and face to face meetings on core topics. Strive for concrete products. Live and learn within the CoP – this important phase of a CoP can last up to several years or even decades.	CoP in full swing
6	Phase out when the domain of the CoP is becoming less relevant. Determine whether a reorientation might open a new vision. Organize a closing event: Celebrate the farewell with results achieved! Use the empty space and time for new initiatives or contributions.	Mission accomplished Happy ending End of Year Party

Support and Coaching

SDC is offering a service entitled, **Knowledge Management – Getting Started**.

For details please refer to:

► knowledgeandresearch@deza.admin.ch, Phone ++41 31 323 38 17

Does your CoP pass the fitness test?

Experience shows that a successful CoP fulfils the criteria of the fitness test. Check your own CoP and tick (✓) what applies to it!

Criteria	Concrete check questions
Purpose	Are the selected topics of interest to all members? Is the domain strategically relevant to the involved organisations? Do all members have their own practice in the domain?
Members of a CoP	Is the relevant experience on board? Is the heterogeneity of the members assured? Is the CoP open to new members?
Norms and rules	Are roles and accountability defined in a common agreement? Are both distant contacts and face-to-face meetings possible? What is the balance between giving and taking among members?
Structure and process	Is the chosen structure clear and flexible enough? Are key roles in the core group defined, such as owner, manager, facilitator, and expert? Is the step-by-step planning process open and transparent?
Flow of “energy”	Do members care about common interests, commitment and trust? Are there regular face-to-face events; celebrated (social) key moments? Is the history of the CoP alive and told to new members?
Results	Is there a common concern as a basis for producing tangible results? Do members get direct and practical benefits? Are results officially recognised by the CoP members’ organisations?
Resources	Do the members have a sufficient time budget for the CoP? Are the member organisations willing to provide time and money? Is the facilitation attractive and stimulating?
Values in a CoP	Is listening to others a living virtue? Are members willing to give without immediate return? Is diversity in thinking and practice validated?

Result? How many ✓ did you mark?

0 ... 8 Your CoP is still in its infancy.

9 ... 15 Your CoP may be in need of serious coaching.

16 ... 19 Your CoP is running well. Some aspects may require improvements.

20 ... 22 Please tell us about your CoP! It must be a fine experience!

23 ... 24 You probably have a too optimistic picture of your CoP! Please check again!

Community of Practice (CoP) – from own to shared knowledge

SDC aims to enhance learning across organisational units and empower people in their work. A Community of Practice is a convincing way of doing this.



- When do you learn most effectively? In a CoP.
- How can you best gain access to the experience of others? In a CoP.

A Community of Practice (CoP) is a group of committed people, active in a common domain, with a genuine interest in each others’ expertise based on their own practice. Members combine their own interests with an open mandate from their organisation and work together in a rather informal structure.

The six essentials of a CoP

- (1) There is a **Community**. A Community has active members with a lively interest in sharing their knowledge. Being a community means something special to the members, and the community has a certain priority. It is not just „what I do after six in the evening“. Members are keen to meet each other because they benefit from the community.
- (2) There is a **Domain**. A CoP has a clear domain, a thematic orientation that is neither too narrow nor too large. This domain is relevant and meaningful to the members; they are interested in specific topics and expect to improve their own practice by sharing experience related to what they do.
- (3) There is a **Practice**. Each and every member has his/her own practice within the domain of the CoP, and members know about each others' practice. One's own practice serves as a kind of reality check when sharing experience, concepts and strategies. Reflecting on one's own practice against the background of other practices is one of the essentials of a CoP.
- (4) There is **Motivation**. A CoP exists only through the motivation of its members. This motivation is recognizable by their personal interest and the priority they assign to the CoP in their daily work. Adhering to a CoP often means developing a passion for it.
- (5) There is a **Mandate**. By means of a mandate, the management of the organisation shows its interest in and commitment to the CoP. It defines, on one hand, the thematic focus and the expected concrete results. On the other hand, the mandate provides an open space for self-commitment to its members, in terms of time and financial resources.
- (6) There is a balance of formal and informal **Structure**. A CoP is a structure beyond organisational boxes and lines. Hierarchy is not an important element. Most CoPs crosslink organisational units and organisations.



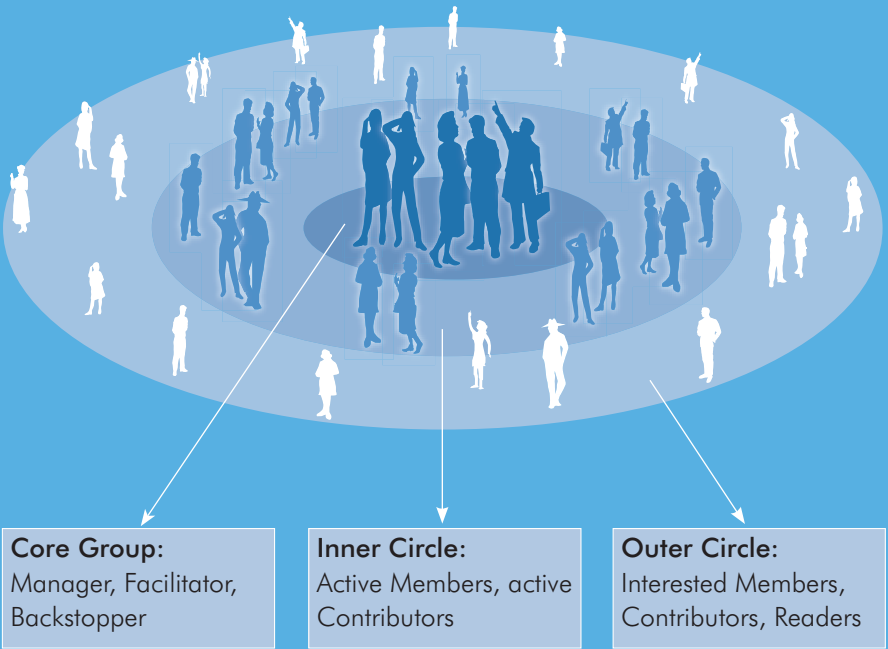
The basic structure of a CoP

Most communities of practice have a threefold concentric structure: A core group, an inner circle, and an outer circle.

The core group acts as a managing group based on an agreed co-ordination mandate. It co-ordinates the activities of the CoP and ensures secretarial support if necessary.

The inner circle functions as a steering committee with an informal structure, meeting once or twice a year. Individual members of the inner circle may be in contact with the core group on demand.

The outer circle consists of interested people, contributors, and readers, forming a loose network.



In their business unit, collaborators shape the organisation; in their teams, collaborators take care of projects; through networks, collaborators form relationships; in their CoPs, collaborators develop the knowledge that lets them perform these other tasks.

A CoP exists in a concrete context and depends on it

- An organisation is ready to host a CoP or to allocate time and resources for a CoP if:
- ▶ The domain has a strategic importance for the organisation.
 - ▶ The CoP and the organisation share common values.
 - ▶ The organization recognises learning and knowledge management as an important asset.
 - ▶ The results are relevant and beneficial for the organisation and its members (i.e. there is an added value).
- A successful CoP is able to cope with the values, the culture and the pragmatism of all supporting organisations.

CoP ... or ... task force ... or ... interest group ... or ...???

A CoP is a kind of a network. But what is the difference between a CoP and other groups of cooperating people? The most striking differences are:

Description of the cooperating group	Tentative main differences with a CoP
Interest Group: Group of persons interested in a topic that invites experts and shares experience. Open for new members, and supported by facilitation.	Loose form, passive role of participants
Task Force: A group of specialists working on a specific task given by the management, often under time pressure.	Guided by management, result-oriented, limited time frame
Self-Help Group: Individuals with similar problems gather for mutual support. Frequent focus on topics related to health and addiction.	Focus on individual problem-solving, coping with a difficult life situation