Cultivating Communities of Practice
by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder

Book Review by Donna Fitzgerald

Editor's note: a link for this book at Amazon Books is at the bottom of this book review.

Introduction
Even though this book is targeted at workplace based groups I think it should offer a wonderful crash course in the experience of creating and facilitating our new PMCop's.

The Review
The first chapter is spent making the case for the usefulness of communities of practice within an organization. Their premise is that COPs are the best organization for preserving "organizational knowledge" as well as for fostering learning and developing Competences. In order to do this the organizations must be supported but not controlled, sponsored but not managed and finally consulted but not forced to participate.

If you accept the basic premise that the COP is the natural form of organization in which professionals will share knowledge how best can a company ensure their development and continued health? In chapter two the authors discuss the relationships of communities of practice to the official organization. The five relationships they've listed are:
• Unrecognized
• Bootlegged
• Legitimized
• Supported
• Institutionalized

Unrecognized COPs are actually more common than most of us realize. On one end of the spectrum it is the spontaneous creation of a group of people who need to share knowledge in order to get a specific problem solved on the other end of the spectrum it occurs in a stable organization where people become hungry to improve both themselves and their company and find themselves internally driven to meet and share ideas on how things can be improved with out destabilizing the organization.

Bootlegged organizations have one additional component that an unrecognized COP lacks — one or two natural leaders. This wasn't clearly articulated in the book and is a premise based on my own 20 years experience in dealing with these organizations but it is only with the presence of the wider vision that a natural leader brings to the group that the organization begins to take on a life of its own. It is also the most frustrating concept for corporate management to accept — a COP can't sustain the next type of organization without the "leader" or "vision holder" in place.

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The third type of organization is one they call "**legitimized**". The book offers some wonderful examples of this type of organization. These COPs begin to have a presence that is visible to the company as a whole. They may have a web site on the intranet and managers will support the time employees spend participating in these groups.

Supported COPs are organizations that balance on the edge of chaos, to borrow a term from the complex adaptive system community. Too much support and they become nothing more than another form of bureaucratic organization too little support and they fail to hold structure during times of transition. The key hallmark of a supported COP is the assignment of resources to either the concept (a group that helps COPs get established and will be available for facilitation) or to the groups themselves (as outlined in the Turbodudes example)

Institutionalized COPs are ones that are actively incorporated into the management structure of the company. Meeting attendance can become mandatory, decisions need to be ratified by the group, etc. In very rare instances this type of COP can work for a short period of time (demands people with an aligned vision and a non bureaucratic mind set). Over time this type of organization will always transform into an "operational team" or dissolve once the needs of the individuals with the passion for sharing find their needs are no longer being met.

Chapter two continues the discussion of the structure of COPs by proposing that every COP must strike a balance between three points of a triangle — structure, community and practice. Or restated a COP must begin by answering the questions:
• Why are we here?
• Who are we individually and collectively?
• How do we earn our keep?

Chapter three outlines the seven principles for cultivating a community of practice. I freely admit I had trouble with this chapter. Having actively participated and created a number of COPs my experience says that six of the seven principles are absolutely not core organizing principles. This is not to say that these principles won't be of importance at some point in the life of a COP only that they aren't a starting point.

The seven principles are:
• Design for evolution
• Open a dialogue between inside and outside participants
• Invite different levels of participation
• Develop both public and private community space

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• Focus on value
• Combine familiarity and excitement
• Create a rhythm for the community

Without belaboring the point I will briefly summarize my objections.

- At the very beginning it's not possible to design for evolution – a COP is the quintessential self organizing undertaking — It is only long after the people, problem and goal have come together that there is even a vague possibility of thinking about conscious design. Plus I would contend that as a self organizing structure evolution or de-evolution are unavoidable components of a COP and therefore don't need to be planned for.
- There are only outside participants once a COP has reached the level of legitimization — you can worry about knowledge sharing outside of the group at that point.
- Ditto for private and public space
- Value is the currency in which a COP trades and the only principle that I believe is truly core
- The principle of familiarity and excitement I believe is miss-stated. The founding principle should be one of inclusion. People need to feel they belong and that participation is safe.
- My experience says once the community is formed it will begin to create its own rhythm. The only thing that needs to happen is that rhythm should be respected and honored.

Chapter four covers the early stages of developing a COP. The presentation of the content might give you the impression that you can derive an almost cookbook approach to getting a COP off the ground. This would be a serious mistake. COPs are created out of passion and vision — They are by their very nature emergent organizations that will go their own way if they're going to survive. The information in chapter four should be approached from the perspective of listening to a consultant whose intention is to give you some background on what they've seen in the past. It may or may not pertain to you.

The discussion of the evolution of the Turbodudes at the beginning of **chapter five** serves to showcase why the authors are such authorities in the field. Once the group is established and has reached the level of "legitimized" the authors' perspective on maintaining the group will become invaluable. Knowing your problem isn't unique won't guarantee success but it might help you try and nudge any COP you're participating in or facilitating in a sustainable direction.

Chapter six covers the particular challenges of running a distributed COP. Based on personal experience I would say the issues are size and culture if the group is global. A small distributed COP is actually quite easy to run – you just need travel money if your goal is to produce a joint work product and if your goal is to offer knowledge dissemination you don't even need that. Running a large global COP is possible for knowledge sharing – though issues of language and culture should be major focus areas but probably not possible if your goal is a tangible work product.

Chapter seven covers what can go wrong with COPs. I admit as an advocate I tend to minimize these problems, writing them off to excess bureaucracy or the ascendancy of power hungry or dysfunctional individuals. Luckily there's an easy way to handle most of these problems – simply start a new group and once the problem is recognized at the corporate level reduce or eliminate the funding and status or the group that has become dysfunctional. One important fact to remember is that all COPs can outlive their usefulness and it's perfectly acceptable to let them dissolve and reform. One of the points that the book makes strongly is that the goal for a corporation is to cultivate the environment in which COPs can thrive – not necessarily keep any one COP alive.

Chapter eight makes the case that it is possible to measure the value creation of COPs. I admit I approached this chapter with some degree of trepidation. Measurement unfortunately equals bureaucracy and letting bureaucracy get a toe hold near a COP is the equivalent in my opinion of striking the death knell. With that said, I was surprised to find myself in full support of their measurement program. They advocate a form of anecdotal evidence that is collected on a rigorously systematic basis. Since I have advocated the same technique as the best way to measure the results of a project portfolio I would add only one caveat; this system of data collection and the evaluation must be entrusted to individuals who are trained to listen and hear the information between the words and in the blank spaces. This techniques isn't some sort of touchy-feely mumbo jumbo, rather it's a common skill found in most consulting companies and in most finance (as opposed to accounting) departments. Again if you want to measure – entrust the job to the right people.

Chapter nine covers creating a community based knowledge initiative. Given my objections to chapters three and four I would recommend using chapter nine as the template for how to go about creating and getting a COP off the ground.

Chapter ten ends with a discussion on expanding the concept of COPs beyond the corporate boundaries into the community or into industry focus areas. This chapter is brief and will serve only to expand the horizon of possibilities. My recommendation is if you get to this point then the book you need is The Boundaryless Organization by Ronald N. Ashkenas (Ed). While it doesn't deal with COPs specifically it makes the business case as to why you would want to participate in something beyond your own brick and mortar walls.

In summary Cultivating Communities of Practice is an excellent piece of "been there – done that" writing. It isn't a step by step cookbook – what it is instead is a subtle form of suitability matching. It lays out a wealth of tacit knowledge that mirrors the experience of what one would get if one formed a community of practice around communities of practice. Therefore I recommend using it not only as a source of information but as a way to help pick people to get one or more COPs off the ground, since the book is guaranteed to resonate with your potential practitioners.

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