

More than a  
“community of  
learners,”  
a community of  
practice is also a  
“community that  
learns.”  
Not merely peers  
exchanging ideas...,  
sharing and benefiting  
from each other’s  
expertise, but  
colleagues committed  
to jointly develop better  
practices.

—George Pór,  
*Community Intelligence  
Labs*

## WHAT IS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE?

A community of practice (CoP) is “a group 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.”<sup>1</sup> CoPs are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning and knowledge-sharing in a shared area of endeavor to exchange information, solve problems, and develop new ways of doing—in the field of family planning, it can be clinicians learning about a new surgical technique, or program and evaluation staff exploring a new implementation model. The Implementing Best Practices (IBP) Initiative, or the membership of the Contraceptive Security Working Group, each comprises a CoP.

Etienne Wenger, an educational theorist and practitioner, well-known for his work on CoPs, argues that there are three key characteristics in defining a CoP:

- A. The *domain*: A CoP is defined by the fact that its members share a domain of interest (e.g., a particular topic area or set of processes). Members’ commitment to the domain of interest and their shared competence in that area is what distinguishes them from other people. Our domain would be long-acting and permanent methods of contraception (LA/PMs).
- B. The *community*: A CoP’s community consists of the people (and the organizations) who pursue involvement with the domain of interest, by engaging in joint activities and discussions, helping each other, and sharing information and expertise. This community engagement is a key aspect of a CoP: By itself, a stand-alone web site is not a CoP.
- C. The *practice*: However, even a shared domain of interest and a community of like-minded people do not fully define a CoP. A CoP also must consist of members who have a shared repertoire of resources: practitioners relating their experiences, describing their tools, and explaining how they address recurring problems. This can only occur in a space where the members have time and a place where they can engage in sustained interaction.

The combination of these three elements constitutes a CoP, and it is by developing these three elements in parallel that such a community is cultivated.

## PARTICIPATION IN A CoP

A key principle in cultivating a CoP is to “invite different levels of participation.” Thus, the community architecture we recommend for the LA/PM CoP will consist of a “coordination team” that will organize events and connect the community—in essence, the heart of the community. The architecture includes three levels of community participation (see figure on opposite page).

- **Level 1:** This is a small core group of people who actively participate in discussions and, with the coordination team, take on projects or activities, identify topics for the community to address, and keep the community momentum going.
- **Level 2:** Outside the core is the active group. These members attend meetings regularly and participate less frequently, but without the regularity of the core group. This also tends to be a small group, as a percentage of the community.

<sup>1</sup> This summary of CoPs is based on: Wenger, E. No date. *Communities of practice: A brief introduction*. Accessed at: [www.ewenger.com/theory/communities\\_of\\_practice\\_intro.htm/](http://www.ewenger.com/theory/communities_of_practice_intro.htm/).

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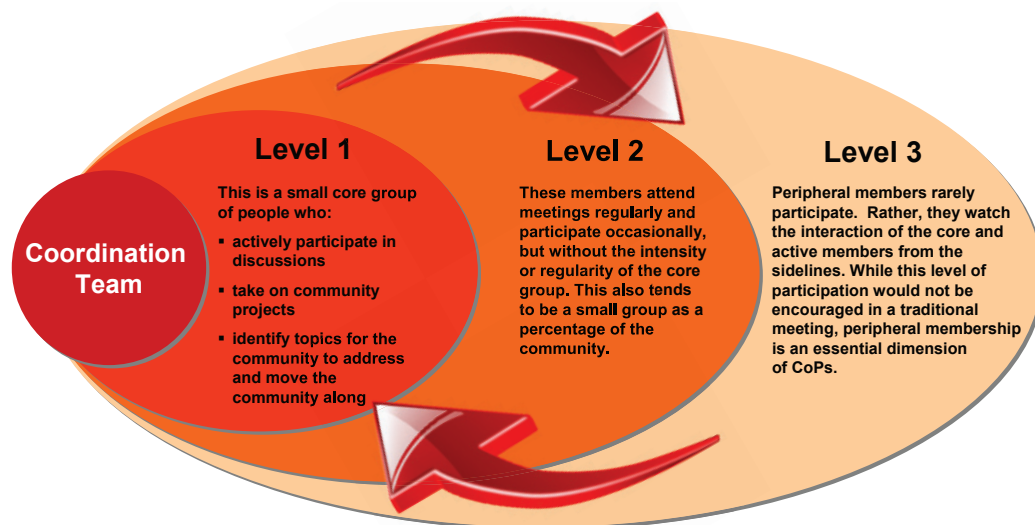
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- **Level 3:** The third and largest level consists of peripheral members. They may participate less frequently or rarely. Rather, they watch the interaction of the core and active members from the sidelines. While this level of participation would not be encouraged in a traditional meeting, peripheral membership is an essential dimension of CoPs. From the sidelines, peripheral members gain their own insights from the discussions and put them to use. They may have private conversations about topics discussed in the public forums. In their own way, they are learning a lot (e.g., the broader 300 or more members of the IBP Initiative).



Movement across these levels is a natural part of how CoPs function. Members are free to engage and disengage for periods of time, as the focus of the community shifts to their areas of interest and expertise. This fluid movement characterizes good community participation. To this end, it is important that the community activities are designed to allow all participants to feel like full members, as well as to leave room for those members who would prefer to observe and learn from others, as a way of keeping peripheral members connected. At the same time, CoPs create opportunities for active members to play limited leadership roles (e.g., leading a project with minimal time commitment and/or a predetermined duration).

**LA/PM CoP**

The purpose of the LA/PM CoP is to bring together a diverse group of professionals and engage in a creative process to address important issues related to expanding contraceptive choice and services. Further, this CoP provides an important opportunity to strengthen learning, commitment, resources and programming for LA/PMs within the international community.

**Additional Information**

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