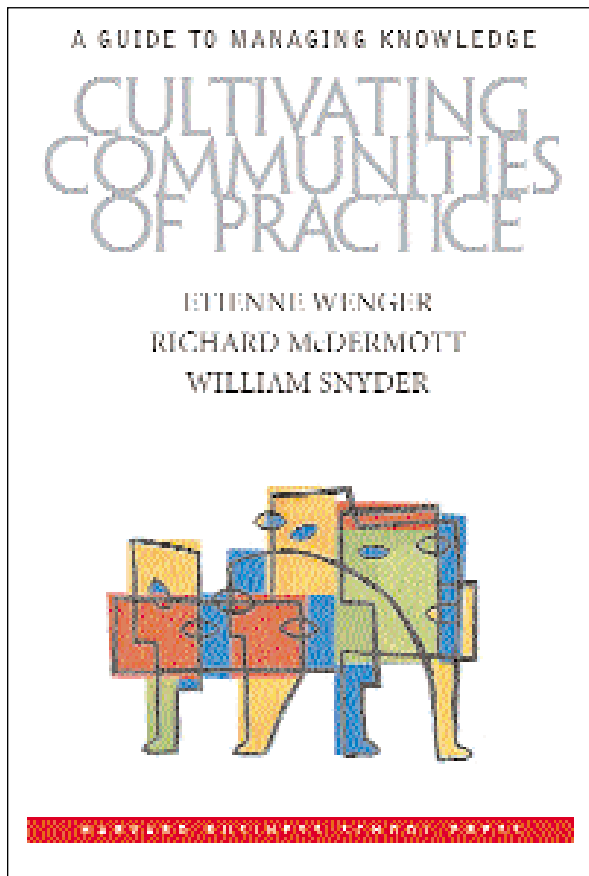


BOOKS



Cultivating Communities of Practice

By Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William Snyder
Reviewed by Amy Newman

If you want to turn your training strategy into a knowledge strategy, take a look at communities of practice—“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 that area by interacting on an ongoing basis.” *Cultivating Communities of Practice* provides a compelling overview of communities of practice, their stages of development, and ways to encourage their growth. Although some of the concepts and structures presented are more complex than necessary (for example, the fractal structure for a global community

resembles a matrix-managed UFO), the book is inspiring—and daunting. I found myself reflecting on the communities I’ve been a part of, wanting to join and support new ones, but still a bit skeptical about how they really work in organizations.

Communities are defined broadly and come in many forms. Arguably, HBO’s Tony Soprano and his cohorts meet the qualifications of a community of practice because they

- meet regularly
- focus on a domain of knowledge (such as perfecting criminal technique)
- share approaches and standards.

ON THE NIGHT STAND

By Alicia White



My days are long, so to relax at night I read. When it comes to reading professional development books, I like the KISS concept: Keep

it simple, (Stupid). It's the best way to keep my attention.

Here are some titles that I'd recommend to my peers.

- *One-Minute Manager* by Kenneth Blanchard and Spencer Johnson. This book really keeps it simple. It describes management techniques in a clear, concise fashion. Remember the sequel rule? The first is always the best.
- *101 Media and Marketing Tips for the Sole Proprietor* by Nanette Miner. This book is the epitome of no nonsense: It gets straight to the point with common-sense ideas for marketing yourself and your company. If you run your own business or manage a training department, you'll find useful ideas.
- *How to Run Seminars and Workshops: Presentation Skills for Consultants, Trainers, and Teachers* by Robert L. Jolles. This must-have book for novice and experienced presenters covers everything from marketing your presentation to dealing with the diverse personality types among participants. Are people sleeping during your sessions? You'll no longer have to wonder how to handle that.

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BOOKS

Although communities go by various names, I prefer Hewlett-Packard's "learning communities." I've been a fan of Etienne Wenger since I first heard his thoughts on communities of practice, but the word *practice* has always struck me as odd. I wondered how well it translates across industries and functions. Terminology aside, I'm convinced that communities of practice have tremendous potential and are a giant leap forward in creating the elusive learning organization. This book, as learning professionals will see, is an important step in taking a progressive, strategic approach towards developing and managing organizational knowledge.

The authors describe a more natural, personal approach to managing knowledge, with technology—finally—taking an important but supporting role. What I found most involving were the terrific and realistic community examples from organizations such as the World Bank, DaimlerChrysler, and McKinsey, where much of this concept originated. More diverse examples would have been helpful, but these are still early days for recognized communities of practice.

One reason communities of practice aren't more prevalent is the question of how to best support them without suffocating them. Knowledge management professionals have learned some lessons from the early days of KM when companies were collecting and codifying oodles of information (not knowledge) into massive databases, many of which weren't used or maintained. But they're misguided when they continue to build

systems and infrastructures in an attempt to encourage learning. That doesn't work for communities that achieve their greatest success through voluntary membership. Such communities want to be supported, but not tightly managed.

Finding the right control-freedom balance is critical to a community's success, yet a topic with which we'll always struggle. That isn't necessarily bad. The balance, the authors state, differs for all organizations. How to measure and manage knowledge needs to be in sync with each organization's culture.

The book suggests various ways to start and sustain communities of practice. Some examples are fairly obvious, such as recruiting new members. Other examples offer hope for people who see the great potential of communities in future society—for example, benchmarking and collaborating across organizations to rejuvenate a company's community of practice and generate a model for organizing civil communities.

Communities of practice have their downsides. Let's return to the Tony Soprano example. Clearly, that community serves itself well but not the greater community. When a community of practice crops up in an organization only to produce negative results, what do you do? Communities, as the authors write, "are...composed of people." It follows that those groups will exhibit a variety of "disorders." Training and development professionals know this all too well: Groups can become arrogant, cliquish, and insular and may be viewed as overly controlling, self-

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important, or, perhaps worse, avoiders of so-called real work. The authors discuss far more potential disorders (for example, irrational politics and rigidity) than treatments. The recommendations include living with the disorders or relying on strong, outside intervention (for example, leadership to “encourage members’ involvement” and challenge members in new ways).

It’s naïve to think that communities of practice will always run themselves; thus, the authors emphasize the need for a community coordinator. They suggest that coordinators spend 20 to 50 percent of their time supporting the community of practice. I couldn’t help wondering who would bear that responsibility. Would it be the people who hold the informal organizational power and can truly influence and network? Or the people who order birthday cakes and plan the company picnics? The decision may greatly affect a community’s success.

The authors suggest a variety of additional roles to launch and support communities, including community librarians, champions, and sponsors. That may be ideal, but I think it crosses the line of too much infrastructure. Let’s face it: When companies are laying off 10 percent of their employees, communities of practice seem like a giant luxury.

Communities of practice need to show results, but not necessarily the same results as a project team. The purpose of communities of practice is to develop knowledge. The authors offer ways to measure success through

“systematic anecdotal evidence”—for example, storytelling—and encourage readers to make conservative estimates of return-on-investment. I found that view refreshing after seeing pumped-up claims by zealous training professionals, such as presentation skills programs reducing turnover by 25 percent.

The book leaves room for additional exploration:

- How can organizations best address issues of intellectual property ownership?
- Because communities of practice are voluntary, what do you do when the key knowledge holder for a particular area is unwilling to participate?
- How will communities draw on the diversity of their members and potential members?
- Is there a place for people who aren’t joiners or don’t have a passion for their job?

As communities of practice catch on—and I hope they do—those questions will need to be addressed more fully.

Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge by Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William Snyder. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, www.hbsp.harvard.edu. 288 pp. US\$29.95

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