

TECHNICAL NOTE N° IDB-TN-3233

IDB Guide to Communities of Practice

Supporting CoPs as dynamic knowledge networks that help the IDB learn faster, share smarter, and strengthen development impact.

Adela Barrio Sarmiento
Fernanda Camera
Lorena Rodríguez

Inter-American Development Bank
Knowledge & Learning Division

October 2025



IDB Guide to Communities of Practice

Supporting CoPs as dynamic knowledge networks that help the IDB learn faster, share smarter, and strengthen development impact.

Adela Barrio Sarmiento
Fernanda Camera
Lorena Rodríguez

Inter-American Development Bank
Knowledge & Learning Division

October 2025



IDB Guide to Communities of Practice

Supporting CoPs as dynamic knowledge networks that help the IDB learn faster, share smarter, and strengthen development impact.



AUTHORS

Adela Barrio Sarmiento
Fernanda Camera
Lorena Rodríguez



Copyright © 2025 Inter-American Development Bank (“IDB”). This work is subject to a Creative Commons license CC BY 3.0 IGO (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/igo/legalcode>). The terms and conditions indicated in the URL link must be met and the respective recognition must be granted to the IDB.

Further to section 8 of the above license, any mediation relating to disputes arising under such license shall be conducted in accordance with the WIPO Mediation Rules. Any dispute related to the use of the works of the IDB that cannot be settled amicably shall be submitted to arbitration pursuant to the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL) rules. The use of the IDB’s name for any purpose other than for attribution, and the use of IDB’s logo shall be subject to a separate written license agreement between the IDB and the user and is not authorized as part of this license.

Note that the URL link includes terms and conditions that are an integral part of this license.

The opinions expressed in this work are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Inter-American Development Bank, its Board of Directors, or the countries they represent.



Contents



1

Why are Communities of Practice becoming important again?

PAGE 04



2

What are CoPs, and why does this guide matter?

PAGE 06

3

How are CoPs structured, supported, and connected?

PAGE 09

4

How to get started?

PAGE 20

5

Sustaining engagement: Visibility, value and belonging

PAGE 23

1

Why are Communities of Practice becoming important again?

The essence of life is connectivity [...] If you want to understand the world around you, you have to start thinking in networks. Understand the principles that govern the networks around you, those that offer possibilities, and those that may hold you back if left unseen. If you become the master of the network, you will also be the master of your fate.

—**Albert-László Barabási, *Masterclass in Infrastructure Networks***

To deliver effective solutions founded on knowledge, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) must continuously learn, adapt, and work together across sectors, countries, and all entities of the IDB Group. In 2007, the creation of the Vice Presidency for Sectors and Knowledge (VPS) laid important groundwork for institutional collaboration among sector specialists. Today, the Group's Institutional Strategy 2024–2030: Transforming for Scale and Impact calls for a deeper transformation. Becoming the region's leading Knowledge Bank requires more than offering technical expertise or generating formal knowledge products; it demands a vibrant, connected ecosystem of professionals, learning and working together.

The concept of Communities of Practice is not new, but the world has changed, and CoPs are reemerging as a vital mechanism for generating and sharing knowledge. The pace of technological advancement, the complexity of development challenges, and the rise of artificial intelligence and other digital tools have redefined

how we work and interact. At the same time, the vision of becoming a Knowledge Bank—one that pushes the frontiers of knowledge by creating high-quality and cutting-edge products and using global insights to bridge regional gaps—demands even greater cooperation. Individual expertise is not enough. It must be part of a concerted effort to share tacit knowledge, make sense of change together, and reflect on experience in a collective setting. CoPs offer a way to do precisely that: to connect people across boundaries and enable a more reflective, human-centered knowledge culture.

The IDB has a longstanding tradition of bringing about collaboration and knowledge sharing through various networks, such as the Regional Policy Dialogues (RPDs), which were started in 2000 to promote high-level, multistakeholder discussion of development priorities. Since their establishment, RPDs have become platforms for regional cooperation and peer learning, strengthening the Bank's influence on knowledge by connecting evidence to public policy and operational decision making. The IDB has supported several CoPs that, while operating independently, have been contributing substantially to knowledge exchange and organizational learning.

CoPs are particularly well suited to knowledge-intensive organizations like the IDB, where essential know-how resides in people rather than in systems. By enabling knowledge exchange across departments, geographies, and sectors, they help good practices emerge, stimulate innovation, and build collective capacity. They are especially relevant in an institution where a large portion of the workforce operates in decentralized country offices, and knowledge must flow not only across disciplines but across the public and private entities of the IDB Group.

By connecting people in meaningful ways, CoPs can strengthen the Group's capacity to learn from best practices, apply lessons in new contexts, and increase overall effectiveness. They help transform the tacit knowledge and expertise of individuals into organizational capability, giving rise to a culture of continuous peer learning and co-creation that amplifies development impact.

2

What are CoPs, and why does this guide matter?

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are **dynamic networks of practitioners** who share similar challenges. Members apply knowledge to real situations, exchange experiences, and develop solutions together. CoPs are not just about participation, however; they are about connections. In any network, a few people play outsized roles in spreading knowledge, linking silos, or bringing insights. Recognizing and nurturing “connectors” helps ideas travel faster, farther, and with more influence.

Communities of Practice are defined and sustained by three core components:¹

- **Domain** refers to a shared challenge—the answer to the question, “What’s the real-world issue that brings us together?” A CoP is united by a specific area of knowledge or concern, whether a technical topic, an operational challenge, or a policy issue that members are committed to exploring together. This “domain” gives the group its purpose and helps create a sense of belonging and shared responsibility among participants, regardless of their positions or locations.
- **Community** refers to the network of trust and relationships among the people upon which CoPs rely. It answers the question, “Who are we connecting with and who’s missing?” Members engage in discussions, share experiences, ask questions, and offer support. A strong and dynamic network encourages collaboration and active participation. A real community forms when people interact regularly, care about each other’s input, and are willing to learn together.

¹ E. Wenger-Trayner and B. Wenger-Trayner, Introduction to Communities of Practice: A Brief Overview, 2015, <https://www.wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/15-06-Brief-introduction-to-communities-of-practice.pdf>.

- **Practice** refers to collective know-how. In this case, the question is, “What are we learning that others can apply?” “Practice” is what individuals do and learn in their professional arenas. Over time, a community develops and refines a shared repertoire of approaches, tools, and lessons that reflect the members’ experience and helps address recurring challenges. Practice grows through repeated interaction and a willingness to reflect, adapt, and document what works.

The three core components of CoPs work interactively. A clear domain brings people together. A strong community sustains engagement. A shared practice builds knowledge that can be reused and improved over time. In a knowledge-driven institution, CoPs are not only discussion spaces; they are vehicles for influence. Well connected, they help the right knowledge reach the right people at the right time.

Prepared by the Knowledge and Learning Division of the IDB, this document provides guidance for the formation of CoPs, outlining the governance structures they can adopt, the resources they can rely on, and the institutional support they can expect. Rather than seeking to establish a centralized program, it offers a starting point from which teams can create and nurture CoPs as dynamic networks that reveal essential knowledge, connect fragmented insights, and activate peer learning across the institution. While conceived as internal guidance for IDB teams, these approaches may also be of value to peer institutions seeking to implement Communities of Practice.

This guide for CoPs supports the Group’s mission to consolidate itself as a Knowledge Bank by empowering teams in a number of ways. Connecting people, projects, and evidence across sectors, countries, and roles, for example, helps them break silos, avoid repetition, and adapt faster. Ensuring that what’s learned in practice is captured, shared, and reused fuels the “knowledge loop” between analytical and operational knowledge and turns isolated insights into collective capability. Furthermore, CoPs boost policy influence and shorten the learning curve through the timely sharing of lessons with decision makers both inside and outside the IDB.

In addition to serving institutional goals, Communities of Practice create tangible value for those who participate in them. Joining a CoP confers on its members a number of capabilities. They can tap more readily into lessons, tools, and solutions others are already using. By sharing their experience, they can raise their visibility, shape how problems are solved, and build their influence. Real-time peer exchange enables members to spot trends, innovations, and operational risks sooner than they otherwise would have, while learning by doing and exchanging know-how can strengthen their skills. And, as they connect with experts inside and outside the IDB Group, members extend the network and broaden their horizons beyond familiar circles.

How do Communities of Practice differ from Learning Communities?

BOTH FOSTER COLLABORATION, BUT THEY SERVE DIFFERENT PURPOSES

Communities of Practice (CoPs)

are groups of practitioners who apply knowledge to real challenges, exchange experiences, and codevelop solutions. Their focus is on practice: adapting and refining know-how in real contexts.

Learning Communities

are groups of people –not necessarily practitioners– who come together primarily to build knowledge or skills on given topics, often through training, courses, or structured knowledge sharing. Their focus is on learning (acquiring and deepening understanding), but not always on applying what they learn collectively.

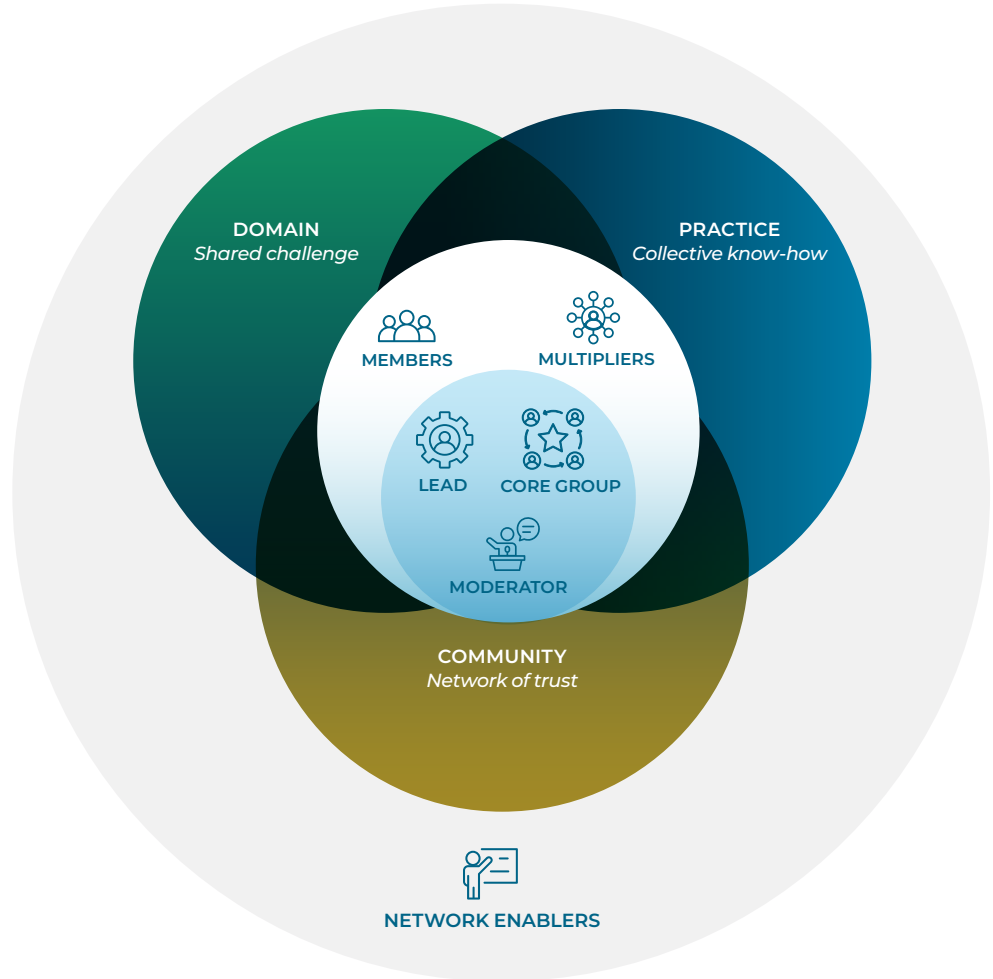
3

How are CoPs structured, supported, and connected?

Communities of Practice are not managed; they are cultivated. Effective governance in CoPs is not about control or formal authority but about creating conditions under which collaboration, trust, and shared ownership can flourish. Drawing on network science, this section outlines the elements that help CoPs function as living systems, where influence spreads through connection, not command, and where strategic support strengthens the network, rather than imposing a hierarchy. It explores light-touch structures, flexible roles, and other essential aspects that allow CoPs to grow organically while remaining connected to the broader knowledge ecosystem and institutional goals.

3.1 Key roles in a living network

Communities thrive when responsibility is shared among active contributors rather than held by a single individual. Leadership in CoPs is inherently distributed, with influence flowing through a small number of well-connected members who help activate, sustain, and connect the network. Identifying and empowering these “network hubs” is essential to fostering engagement, continuity, and visibility. Below are roles commonly found in Communities of Practice. Depending on the community’s objectives and thematic focus, additional roles may be identified as needed.



Members are the heart of every CoP. They make the network come alive by joining sessions and contributing experience, asking questions and offering peer support, and applying shared lessons in their work. Sometimes, they evolve into core group members or multipliers (see below). In a healthy network, members don't all engage equally, but all should feel welcome, seen, and able to contribute.

CoP Leads are the members who energize and provide strategic direction to the community. Through their efforts, they activate the rest of the members to share and connect with each other, and they help maintain the community's engagement rhythm and purpose. They identify and support emerging multipliers, and they align the activities of the community with broader institutional priorities.

Beyond expertise, CoP Leads are encouraged to bring to the community relational intelligence, curiosity, and credibility. They may emerge organically or be elected, often balancing this role with other institutional responsibilities. Some choose to facilitate the community themselves, while others are supported by a moderator.

Moderators are the CoP members who keep things focused and flowing—that is, moving forward and not stagnating. Responsible for facilitating dialogue and supporting inclusive participation, they capture insights from the community’s interactions and document what matters, and they help maintain momentum between sessions. Behind the scenes, they support coordination of community activities.

The **Core Group (or steering circle)** is the backbone of a distributed leadership, bringing diverse perspectives to the community. These members serve not as gatekeepers but as enablers. The group supports agenda setting and prioritization, helps monitor engagement, and adapts meeting formats.

Multipliers (network nodes) are members who drive flow, visibility, and reach. They serve to amplify knowledge across units, countries, or communities, bring in new voices, and translate learning into action in their operational spaces. Multipliers also act as hubs, accelerating the making of new connections and the uptake of knowledge.

Network enablers are not community members. Rather, they are organizational sponsors that nurture and connect the ecosystem in which the communities exist. CoPs need space to grow, not to be controlled. Network enablers, such as the Knowledge and Learning Division (KLD) and other sponsoring units, work behind the scenes, offering strategic guidance, practical tools, and institutional linkages that help communities align with broader priorities, share what works, and prosper as part of a living network. They also ensure that insights generated through CoPs flow upward, informing cross-sector learning and institutional decision making, and sideways, connecting CoPs as part of an integrated network of networks.

Depending on each CoP's needs, KLD can provide practical guidance, templates, methodologies, and onboarding toolkits. It can recommend the use of AI-powered tools and connection to the Knowledge Platform, guide CoPs in disseminating captured knowledge and monitoring their own performance, and offer peer-to-peer learning opportunities.

3.2 Membership and participation models

Communities of Practice at the IDB are intentionally flexible in structure and can adopt any of three different participation models, depending on their purpose, scope, and target audience:

- **Open participation:**

Anyone with a genuine interest in the topic can join and participate voluntarily. Open-participation communities often thrive on the diversity of perspectives and benefit from self-driven engagement.

- **Closed participation:**

Membership is by invitation only, typically based on specific roles, responsibilities, or affiliation with a functional area. This model is useful when discussions involve sensitive topics or require targeted expertise.

- **Moderated or semi-open participation:**

Individuals may request to join, but their participation must be approved by the community leader or core group. This model allows for a degree of openness while ensuring alignment with the community's objectives and maintaining a manageable group size.

In addition to the different modes of participation, CoPs at the IDB can vary in their composition: They may be strictly internal, composed exclusively of Bank employees, or hybrid, blending internal and external

stakeholders, such as government agencies, members of academia or think tanks, or implementing partners. The appropriate model for composition depends on the CoP's objectives, its scope, and the nature of the knowledge being exchanged.

*The structure of a Community of Practice should serve the flow. **Effective CoPs strike a balance between openness and relevance, building trust regardless of the type of participation.** Not everyone engages equally, but well-designed spaces allow value to emerge from different levels of participation.*



3.3 Interaction formats and engagement rhythm

Each Community of Practice can define how often and how formally it engages. The rhythm and formats of interaction should reflect the community's goals, level of maturity, and connectivity, not simply the calendar. Some members will be highly active; others will engage occasionally. That's normal in a healthy network. The key is to create touchpoints that allow people to connect, contribute, and reuse knowledge.

CoPs are encouraged to combine in-person, virtual, synchronous, and asynchronous interactions. While virtual engagement enables keeping ideas in motion across locations and schedules, face-to-face meetings remain essential for building trust, strengthening personal bonds, and fostering deeper collaboration. Ideally, communities balance both, blending real-time dialogue with ongoing digital collaboration.

Different formats for engagement serve different purposes. The following are some examples:

To activate and share knowledge

- **Flash talks/lightning rounds** – providing quick hits of inspiration
- **Learning spotlight** – open sharing of lessons and dilemmas
- **Cross-CoP exchanges** – to generate insights across communities
- **Roundtables** – for the unpacking of real cases from multiple viewpoints

To solve problems in real time

- **Peer clinics/solution labs** – mobilizing group intelligence to solve
- **World café/fishbowl** – inclusive formats to explore complexity

To co-create and capture value

- **Tool/product jams** – to build templates, FAQs, and guides together
- **Co-writing sprints** – to produce drafts or responses on the spot
- **Knowledge harvests** – to synthesize emerging knowledge in usable form

To expand perspectives

- **External guest sessions** – bringing in fresh thinking or field insights
- **Thematic exchanges** – comparison of practices across countries and/or sectors

CoPs are also encouraged to define a “core cadence” for meeting (for example, bimonthly, quarterly, or as needed) to maintain continuity; specify lighter touchpoints (such as async surveys, polls, or five-minute updates); and emphasize short, purpose-driven sessions (of ninety minutes or less) with clear follow-up.

In fast-moving networks, ideas that leave a trace travel farther. Even a short, well-summarized discussion can influence someone who has never attended a session. Between meetings, AI tools and digital platforms can be used to facilitate a continuous flow of knowledge.

3.4 Knowledge capture and dissemination

A key contribution of a Community of Practice is its ability to bring out and share the knowledge that emerges through interaction. While CoPs are not required to produce formal outputs, they are encouraged to document and disseminate the knowledge they generate to maximize institutional learning and strengthen collective capacity across the organization. There are many examples of formats for doing so:

- Syntheses of good practices, lessons learned, or key takeaways from discussions
- FAQs, job aids, checklists, or templates for practical use
- Learning notes or short reflections on real-world cases
- Curated resource lists or recommended readings

Whenever possible, knowledge generated by CoPs should be shared through the IDB Group Knowledge Platform, so it becomes taggable, discoverable, and reusable, allowing others across the Bank to build on these insights and reducing duplication of efforts. Even short outputs can influence major decisions if disseminated at the right times.

3.5 Technology and platforms

Technology is important to enabling continuous connection, collaboration, and knowledge exchange within Communities of Practice. The IDB offers a range of digital tools to support interaction, documentation, and visibility, but it is the responsibility of each CoP to manage its own content and activities. The available tools are listed below.

Digital workspaces

- **Microsoft SharePoint** or **Moodle** for storing documents, sharing resources, and collaborating asynchronously. These workspaces may host the following resources:
 - Event pipelines with calendars, recordings, and session materials
 - Toolkits and templates for planning, onboarding, and facilitation
 - Collections of best practices and lessons learned and directories to locate experts
 - Forums for structured discussions, continuous exchange, and peer learning

Virtual collaboration tools

- **Microsoft Teams** for meetings, chats, and shared files
- **Miro** (external) for visual co-creation and whiteboarding
- **Microsoft Forms and Polls** for surveys, feedback gathering, or quick decisions
- **Slido** (external) for interactive presentations and live polls

AI-enabled knowledge tools

- **Microsoft Copilot** (in Teams and Office) to summarize notes, draft content, and extract insights
- **Seek** for accessing and synthesizing publications and asking specific questions about IDB research
- **IDB Group Knowledge Platform** to access lessons learned and similar projects for insights and collaboration. It streamlines the capture, systematization, and sharing of evidence-based knowledge.

- **Lessons Writing Assistant** to structure and improve documentation of lessons learned

Project management and planning tools

- **Microsoft Planner** for tracking CoP tasks, event planning, or shared project boards

3.6 Life cycle and sustainability

CoPs are dynamic by nature. They evolve through identifiable stages, as engagement and relevance shift over time. Some grow and deepen, while others fulfill their purpose and come to a close. This is not a sign of failure, but rather a valid outcome, evidence of a healthy knowledge ecosystem that adapts and makes room for emerging needs. A CoP's life cycle can be summarized as follows:²

- 1 Ideation** – An idea emerges, often informally, to connect people around a shared interest, challenge, or opportunity.
- 2 Initiation** – A small group forms, articulates a common purpose, and begins meeting to test commitment and potential.
- 3 Growth** – Membership expands, activities gain rhythm, trust deepens, and community identity strengthens.
- 4 Maturity** – The community has clear value, active participation, and sustained engagement; outputs and influence are visible.
- 5 Division or Decline** – The CoP splits into subgroups, shifts focus, or gradually winds down as energy or relevance fades.

² World Bank, *Communities of Practice: A Quick Start Guide* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2023). <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/knowledgeexchange/publication/communities-of-practice-a-quick-start-guide>.

*Even in the most vibrant networks, central nodes eventually lose influence. **The key is to design for evolution, not permanence.***

3.7 Indicators of value and adaptation

To remain meaningful and sustainable, CoPs must be able to demonstrate value, both to their members and the broader institution. In networks, hubs form and fade. Influence is not evenly distributed, and energy naturally concentrates and dissipates. While CoPs are not expected to adopt complex monitoring systems, they are encouraged to have simple “pulse checks” in which they periodically reflect on their health, relevance, and contribution.

KLD will provide light-touch guidance to help communities assess their evolution and adapt when needed. A mixture of quantitative and qualitative indicators can be used to capture different dimensions of value. Among them are the following:

Activity and engagement metrics

- Number and frequency of meetings or activities held
- Member participation rates over time
- Contributions to discussion forums or collaborative spaces
- Uptake of shared tools or resources
- Growth or stability in membership
- Number of knowledge products created and disseminated

Perception and value metrics

- Survey feedback on relevance, usefulness, and sense of connection
- Perceived impact on day-to-day work or professional development
- Testimonials or informal feedback shared during sessions
- Level of voluntary engagement (such as members offering to present, lead activities, or co-create outputs)

Results and institutional impact

- Success stories, related in narratives that demonstrate the business value and impact of communities
- Evidence of improved practices, reduced duplication, or faster problem solving
- Use of community outputs (tools, notes, templates) by other teams or units
- Alignment of CoP contributions with institutional goals or strategic priorities

CoPs are encouraged to use these indicators as a learning tool, not a performance evaluation mechanism. Periodic reflection on what is working, and what may need to evolve, can help communities stay relevant, energized, and aligned with member needs.

4

How to get started?

Starting a new CoP doesn't require a rigid process; what matters most is **dynamism, connection, and clarity of purpose**. Below are some steps for employees interested in initiating a Community of Practice at the IDB. This guide offers simple ways to help you move from idea to action, while keeping the network flexible and member driven. The Knowledge and Learning Division is available to provide support at this early stage by brainstorming ideas, helping refine your initial concept, and providing guidance, tools, and support.

Step 1. Define the purpose, shared domain, and expected results of the CoP.

Clarify the common interest, challenge, or opportunity that brings people together. A strong domain helps create direction and ownership from the beginning and lays the foundation for a meaningful and sustainable community.

- **Reflect on the following questions:** What is your area of focus? What specific issues or challenges are you trying to address? Why does addressing them matter (to the organization and to potential members)? What are you hoping to achieve? Which indicators are you going to use to measure success? Who will benefit if this community succeeds, and how?

→ **Tip:** The more focused the domain, the easier it is to gain traction early.

Step 2. Identify potential members and multipliers.

Don't think just in terms of titles; think in terms of vitality and networks. Who's already asking questions about the CoP's domain, sharing insights, or connecting with others? Reach out to colleagues who share this interest or face similar challenges. Aim for diversity across roles, sectors, or countries to enrich learning.

- **Reflect on the following questions:** Who are the people you want to engage with? Are you targeting a specific level or mixture of expertise? Who could lead this effort? Will you form a core group to guide the community? Should participation be open or by invitation? Should it be internal only or open to external partners?

→ **Tip:** In strong networks, a few active connectors make the biggest difference. Find them early.

Step 3. Design the first interactions.

Early momentum matters. Start with an activity that is light but meaningful: a flash talk, a peer clinic, or a mini case-sharing session. Don't overdesign; just create space for people to contribute and connect.

- **Reflect on the following questions:** What is a first question or topic that will spark exchange? How and where will the community gather—online, in person, or both? How often will you meet? What kinds of outputs or knowledge products do you envision producing? How will governance be organized? How will information be communicated, documented, and accessed?

→ **Tip:** Every session should leave a trace—an insight, a slide, or a simple summary. This is how knowledge starts to flow.

*You don't need a perfect plan. **You need a purpose, a few motivated people, and a space where learning can emerge.***

5

Sustaining engagement: Visibility, value, and belonging

Engagement in Communities of Practice doesn't rely on structure or incentives alone. Participation flourishes when people feel their contributions matter, are seen, and lead to influence, nurturing a sense of value and belonging. In network terms, visibility and connection often matter more than formal recognition. A thoughtful approach to recognition helps reinforce the purpose and dynamism of a CoP without requiring excessive effort. Taking one or many of the simple steps below can help keep people engaged.

What Keeps People Engaged?



1

MAKE CONTRIBUTIONS VISIBLE



2

OFFER "MICRO-RECOGNITION"



3

REWARD WHAT SPREADS



4

COMMUNICATE THE "WHY"



5

USE "GAMIFIED" NUDGES

First, make contributions visible. Celebrate active members and community leads through institutional channels, such as internal newsletters, the Annual Knowledge Report, or CoP presentations. Where possible, tie visibility to career recognition, like performance reviews or development plans. A mention can go a long way.

Second, **offer “micro-recognition.”** Shoutouts, spotlights, and short features in knowledge communications help people feel seen, especially in virtual environments.

Third, **reward what spreads.** Highlight knowledge that gets reused or inspires action in other teams. This reinforces behaviors that add value to the wider network.

Fourth, **communicate the “why.”** Emphasize how CoPs help members solve real problems, connect across silos, and increase their strategic insight. Participation shouldn't feel like extra work; it should feel like smarter work.

And, finally, **use “gamified” nudges.** Applied sparingly and strategically, light tools like milestones, mini-challenges, or leaderboards can motivate early momentum, especially in digital settings.

*In real networks, the nodes that are most connected get these connections not because they work the hardest, but because they are seen. **Recognition isn't about hierarchy, it's about reinforcing participation that creates value.***

While a network, like a group, is a collection of people, it includes something more: a specific set of connections between people in the group. These ties, and the particular pattern of these ties, are often more important than the individual people themselves. They allow groups to do things that a disconnected collection of individuals cannot. The ties explain why the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

—**Nicholas A. Christakis, *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives***

