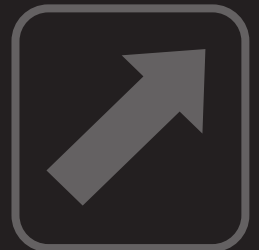
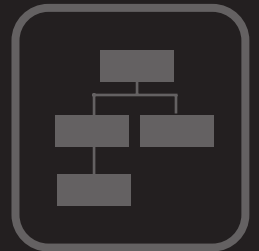


# Establishing a Community of Practice to Enhance Training and Technical Assistance



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## INTRODUCTION

The Compassion Capital Fund (CCF), administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, provided capacity building grants to expand and strengthen the role of nonprofit organizations in their ability to provide social services to low-income individuals. Between 2002 and 2009, CCF awarded 1,277 grants, and the CCF National Resource Center provided training and technical assistance to all CCF grantees.

*Strengthening Nonprofits: A Capacity Builder's Resource Library* is born out of the expansive set of resources created by the National Resource Center during that time period, to be shared and to continue the legacy of CCF's capacity building work.

*Strengthening Nonprofits: A Capacity Builder's Resource Library* contains guidebooks and e-learnings on the following topics:

1. Conducting a Community Assessment
2. Delivering Training and Technical Assistance
3. Designing and Managing a Subaward Program
4. Going Virtual
5. Identifying and Promoting Effective Practices
6. Leading a Nonprofit Organization: Tips and Tools for Executive Directors and Team Leaders
7. Managing Crisis: Risk Management and Crisis Response Planning
8. Managing Public Grants
9. Measuring Outcomes
10. Partnerships: Frameworks for Working Together
11. Sustainability
12. Working with Consultants

Who is the audience for *Strengthening Nonprofits: A Capacity Builder's Resource Library*?

Anyone who is interested in expanding the capacity of nonprofit services in their community – from front line service providers to executives in large intermediary organizations – will benefit from the information contained in this resource library. The National Resource Center originally developed many of these resources for intermediary organizations, organizations that were granted funds by CCF to build the capacity of the faith-based and community-based organizations (FBCOs) they served. As such, the majority of the resources in *Strengthening Nonprofits: A Capacity Builder's Resource Library* support intermediary organizations in their capacity building efforts. However, funders of capacity building programs (Federal program offices and foundations) and the nonprofit community (including FBCOs) at large will also find these resources helpful. In addition, individuals working to build capacity within a program or an organization will be able to use these resources to support their efforts to implement change and make improvements.

The *Establishing Communities of Practice to Enhance TTA* guidebook will be helpful to any intermediary or group of organizations seeking to use communities of practice as part of their technical assistance plan.

Who developed the *Establishing Communities of Practice to Enhance TTA* guidebook?

The guidebook was developed for Department of Health and Human Services by the National Resource Center.

## OVERVIEW

A community of practice (COP) is a group of people who share a common concern, set of problems, or passion about a topic and deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.<sup>1</sup> This guidebook sets out to provide insight into and methods for incorporating a COP into your training and technical assistance (TTA) program for organizations you serve.

Incorporating a COP into your TTA practice amplifies the investment you are already making. As trainers and technical assistance providers already know, adult learners absorb more when new practices are introduced and reinforced through varying teaching methods and corroboration from respected peers. COPs create opportunities for:

- Peer learning to complement instructor-led training
- Peer coaching around the implementation of a practice following technical assistance
- Peer support that has the potential to outlive the TTA program, stretching out the investment you are making in these organizations
- Ensuring that best and promising practices are brought back to and implemented in the organizations that you serve

COPs are known by many other names, including:

- Peer networks
- Learning circles
- Action teams
- Councils

This guidebook will provide practical ideas and activities for launching and managing COPs as an enhancement to your organization's TTA provision.

## GETTING STARTED

### Considerations for Getting Started

Imagine you are being asked to take part in an ongoing activity that requires a considerable amount of time and effort. What information would you like to know before agreeing to participate? What would reassure you that the time and effort would be well spent? What past experiences do you have that you might need to let go of in order to embrace this new experience? How could you be reassured that any work you would do as part of a group would be more valuable than what you could do on your own? What positive experiences might influence you to want to take part?

These are the kinds of questions that need to be answered before one can fully engage in a new learning experience. To build buy-in and enthusiasm for participation in COPs, then, consider facilitating activities that help each participant recognize 1) common needs among members of their COP and 2) valuable experience and expertise among COP members.

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1 Wenger, Etienne, Richard McDermott, and William M. Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2002) 4.

## Activities for Getting Started

In today's TTA environment, activities occur both in person and virtually. When launching a COP, it is highly recommended that the activities take place in person. Typically, in-person launches take place at training events. They could be held on one evening of a training series, at a conference, at an orientation, etc. However, launches can work virtually as well, so we will provide some ideas for that too.

### Forming Groups — Finding Each Other

When forming a COP among your TTA participants, first consider whether you will pre-assign groups or allow for self-selection.

**Pre-assigning** works well when the COP is highly integrated into other elements of your TTA program. This may be the case in the following situations:

- Your training series includes “homework” that lends itself to a consistent group doing work together.
- You are intentionally building collaborations across organizations in a specific geographic area.
- You are intentionally building collaborations across specifically targeted organizations.
- Your entire group will be one community of practice (rather than multiple COPs).

If pre-assigning, remember that you will need to do more work to create buy-in about *who* is in the group and *why* the group has been formed.

**Self-assigning** is a great way to get participants to buy in to the COP from the very beginning. Time can be dedicated at a training event or conference for participants to form their own groups based on criteria that they help create.

Some possible activities for self-assigning at an *in-person* event include:

- **Holding a group discussion about the criteria for forming COPs** (e.g., subject matter expertise, social service priorities, geographic area, level of commitment, organizational mission, virtual/in-person), followed by allotted time for members to find one another according to the agreed-upon criteria.
- **Identifying a list of COP subject areas and having participants choose** the subject area that is of the most interest to them (e.g., board development, leadership and management, staff development, raising funds).
- **Conducting a speed-dating type of “matching” event** where participants take part in a series of two- to five-minute conversations about their area of expertise and experience, as well as what they are hoping to learn. Participants keep a running list of who is a good “match” based on these short, facilitated discussions. At the end of the event, participants submit their lists. Using these lists, you create the teams, ensuring that each group is made up of a good proportion of individuals who are choosing each other.
- **Asking grantees to identify their organization on a map** (using stickers, push pins, etc.) and letting them group themselves based on geographic proximity.

Some possible *virtual* activities for self-assigning may include:

- **Hosting a virtual COP kickoff meeting via webinar** using GotoWebinar, Adobe Connect, Wiggio, or any number of free services during which you can introduce the COP and facilitate live self-assigning activities. For example:

- ▶ Having grantees break out into virtual “rooms” based on their interest area or passion (Adobe Connect and Elluminate Live have this functionality.)
- ▶ Administering a series of live poll questions, making answers visible to all participants. At the end of the webinar, send poll results to all participants and ask them to identify up to five people they would like to have in their group. Then, create groups based on this input. Possible polling questions may include:
  - Would you like to be able to meet in person?
  - What are the three biggest points of pain at your organization?
  - What are your organization’s greatest strengths?
  - What expertise do you have to offer?
  - What expertise are you hoping to develop?
  - What are your expectations of a community of practice?
  - What does your organization do?
  - What would you most value about a COP?
  - What capacity building topic is of most interest to you? (Perhaps make this multiple choice.)
- ▶ If your COP is a smaller group, consider hosting a webinar where you display a series of questions one at a time on PowerPoint slides and allow each member of the group to answer the question on the phone line. This can help members get to know one another and interact in a more personal way than on the web.
- **Setting up sub-groups around practice areas** (e.g., board development, leadership and management, staff development, raising funds) in a virtual workspace and inviting participants to select the one that is most attractive to them. Use free/low-cost online collaboration tools to create virtual workspaces according to a pre-determined set of practice areas. For tools, consider Wiggio, Ning, Yugma, or Google Groups.

## Finding the Value

Some possible activities for helping members see the potential value of the COP an *in-person* event include:

- **Building a “web” of needs and expertise.** This interactive activity is great for groups that enjoy a game. Using a ball of twine, participants express a need of their organization that is relevant to the subject matter area of the COP and state it aloud. Another member with that expertise speaks up and talks a little about the expertise they have that might help meet that need. The person with the “need” then throws the ball of twine to the “expert.” The game continues in this manner until everyone is connected to another person within the COP. The group then draws a representation of the web on a piece of paper that documents the needs/expertise discovered through the activity.
- **Creating a visual display of expertise objects.** Ahead of the launch, ask participants to bring with them a physical representation of what they have to offer that others might value. This could be an article, a story, a photo, or a tool/template. Post these objects in a place that gets a lot of traffic. At some point during the event, give participants an opportunity to introduce themselves to the group by explaining their object.

- **Creating a visual display of expertise objects.** Ahead of the launch, ask participants to bring with them a physical representation of what they have to offer that others might value. This could be an article, a story, a photo, or a tool/template. Post these objects in a place that gets a lot of traffic. At some point during the event, give participants an opportunity to introduce themselves to the group by explaining their object.
- **Conducting appreciative interviews.** COP members pair off and rotate to speak with each member of their COP asking appreciative questions to find out what the person has to offer the COP. The facilitator can draft appreciative questions. Some examples may include:
  - ▶ What motivates you to do your work?
  - ▶ What talents and skills make you effective at your work?
  - ▶ What have been the most fulfilling moments in your career?

Typically in an appreciative interview process, the interviewer repeats the answers back to the speaker. At the end of the interview, the speaker and listener swap places.

- **Identifying three common organizational needs.** Give the group a half-hour to identify the needs of each of their organizations and discuss common needs, and then pick the top three most pressing needs. Follow-on activities can include exploration of approaches that the COP can take to work together to address these needs.
- **Collecting autographs.** Prior to the launch, the facilitator reaches out to participants to gather information about their strengths, experiences, and accomplishments. The facilitator picks a key fact about each person in the COP and includes it on a fact sheet about the members of the COP. Members take the sheet and try to match the person to the fact. When they find the right match, they ask the person to autograph the sheet next to the fact. The “winner” is the first one to collect all the autographs.

Some possible *virtual* activities for seeing potential value may include the following:

- **Conducting a live virtual needs assessment using webinar and polling technology.** Show the results as you go. You may choose to ask a series of poll questions that will help you as the organizer understand the hopes and fears of COP members in terms of percentages (e.g., 45% of your group might be worried that the COP will take up too much of the work day). By conducting the needs assessment this way, you can immediately address “pain points” and shape the COP accordingly. Virtual needs assessments may also be done ahead of time with an online survey (free tools include SurveyMonkey, Google Forms, and Zoomerang). You can then use the webinar time to address concerns and potential benefits, encouraging discussion among COP members.
- **Identifying three common needs of the organizations.** Via conference call, have each member prepare and present the most pressing needs of their organization. Using free desktop-sharing technology (e.g., ScreenStream, TeamViewer, Yuuguu), keep a running list of these needs. Work together using the list to group and prioritize the needs. Then identify the top three needs that the group is committed to addressing together.
- **Conducting a webinar displaying the results of an asynchronous (not live) needs assessment.** One member of the COP would administer the needs assessment and put together the presentation. This facilitator would then pose some questions piggy-backing off of the needs assessment findings. Members can answer questions by live conference call or by interactive features on virtual meetings (raising hands, chatting, white boarding, etc.)

## DEFINING COPS

### Considerations for Defining COPS

Once COPS have completed an activity to discover how they might benefit from the group, the next step is to facilitate the development of a working structure for the group. Discussions about structure will also lead to deeper exploration of the value of maintaining this learning community.

### Activities for Defining COPS

- **Having COPS explore and prioritize needs and goals.** Following up on activities for getting started, a key next step is identifying which needs are common to most members and prioritizing which of these common needs should be tackled by the group and in what order. Ensure that COPS have the time and space to answer the following questions:
  - ▶ Can the COP do something to address the need that will have a greater impact than any individual acting alone?
  - ▶ What existing assets or resources within the community can be leveraged to help address the need?
  - ▶ What outcome that the COP could produce would satisfactorily address the need?
  - ▶ What type of work is most useful to the COP? Possible options include innovating, distilling best practices, collective problem solving, and group learning.
- **Setting up basic infrastructure.** The TA provider can help the COP get off to a strong start by providing some basic infrastructure for the COP. This may include:
  - ▶ Setting up a free conference call number and recommending frequency of calls, e.g., suggest that the group meet monthly and consider providing a set of suggested dates.
  - ▶ Setting up a community website to reduce COP start-up obstacles. Free and low-cost online services like Google Groups, Wiggio, Ning, and Jive can be set up by the TA provider. An alternative is for the TA provider to work with COP leaders to set up their own sites for their COPS.
  - ▶ Setting up a regular meeting of COP leaders facilitated by the TA provider. Regular support can serve to reenergize COPS.
- **Having COPS create an action plan.** Provide a template for the COPS to fill out. You may want to break the template into a series of smaller components to be completed over the course of a conference or over a series of conference calls for greatest impact. A robust action plan would answer the following questions:
  - ▶ What potential do you see in your team?
  - ▶ What are three of your team's goals?
  - ▶ How will you know when these goals have been accomplished?
  - ▶ What general structure have you determined for your team? Possible options might include:



- Regular informal check-ins during which members who have something going on can bring the topic up for discussion on a group call.
  - Peer trainings where each member trains on a topic or leads a discussion of interest to all members. You may want to determine topics in advance and include them within an action plan.
  - Presentations on existing practices, followed by discussions on how to improve them.
  - Presenting problems to the group to discuss and solve together.
- ▶ How frequently will meetings occur? How long will they be? How will they occur (conference call, virtual meeting, in-person meeting, etc.)?
  - ▶ How will each meeting be structured?
  - ▶ When is your next meeting?
  - ▶ What is each individual member's commitment to the COP?
  - ▶ How will the COP share and store resources?
  - ▶ What roles are needed in the COP and who will fill them? Some suggested roles include:
    - Leader – ensures that the team keeps its commitment and retains its vitality. The leader will keep the pulse of the team, adapt its activities, facilitate or coordinate the meetings, and check in with others as defined by their roles. Leaders who reach out individually to engage and reengage members to understand why they are or are not invested in the community are key to maintaining a highly functioning team.
    - Meeting facilitator (consider rotating this role)
    - Communicator – follows up with people who missed a meeting to fill them in and get their input. May also be charged with keeping minutes.
    - Cybrarian – manages online space (discussion boards, shared files, etc).
    - Subject matter experts – identify the existing expertise within the group to have on hand should particular needs arise.

## MANAGING COPS

### Considerations for Managing COPS

Even once COPS are regularly meeting, have found their groove, and are on track to accomplishing their goals and activities, ongoing management and attention are required to keep the momentum going. The TA provider plays a crucial role here in supporting the leaders of each COP to provide strong leadership and management.

### Activities for Managing COPS

TA providers can support COP leaders in leading and managing their COPS in the following ways:

- **Convening team leaders on a regular basis.** The TA provider can convene a monthly conference call to support leaders and keep the momentum of the COPS alive. A typical agenda could include a go-around about what is happening with each COP and/or any successes and challenges they may have experienced. The COP leader call can help model types of interactions that may occur in the COPS themselves. This

relatively low-effort activity also enables the TA provider to have an ear to the ground about issues and challenges common to all the participating organizations in the COPs. TA providers may also consider maintaining an online workspace via Yahoo, Google Groups, Wiggio, Ning, or other various free services.

- **Suggesting “Going Deeper with Your COP” activities along with TTA activities.** To make a direct link between your TTA activities and the COPs, provide explicit activity ideas as part of training plans. Some examples might include:
  - ▶ Conduct peer grant reviews within the COP after a training on grant writing
  - ▶ Develop a case study organizational capacity building problem with a whole class and suggest that COPs work through the case study together
  - ▶ Ask members of the COP to provide feedback on their peers’ work plans
- **Checking in regularly with individual COP leaders.** COP leaders have taken on additional responsibilities in the midst of an already busy schedule. Quick outreach calls to check on how they are doing and to offer support help maintain their commitment and enthusiasm. Regular check-ins also prevent challenges from derailing the COP.
- **Scheduling evaluations.** Take time with COP leaders to step back and evaluate the progress of their COPs. Share promising practices and address any challenges they are facing. This can be done via online survey or on the phone in the form of a facilitated discussion. Brainstorm solutions to the challenges discussed with the group and modify the COP structure going forward (if necessary) to integrate feedback and improve the group’s functioning.
- **Providing tools and templates to support the work of the COPs.** Some very helpful tools and templates would include the following:
  - ▶ Case study template. A document for use by groups that allows individual members to present a problem for the group to solve. The template could include the following fields:
    - Background information about the organization (mission statement, relevant projects, and organizational data, like number of full-time employees, budget, quantities of service provided, affiliations, etc.).
    - A description of the challenge to be discussed by the COP in 1-2 sentences
    - A description of the approach taken to date, including who was involved, what actions they took, how long the approach has taken, and what the results have been.
    - A description of the challenges experienced with the approaches taken to date.
    - Questions to be discussed by the group.
  - ▶ Promising practices template. A document that captures promising practices which the group agrees are the best or most innovative approaches for an organization to take to perform a specific type of activity. Suggested fields for the template include:
    - Practice Summary
    - Issue Description
    - Practice Description

- Real-Life Examples
  - Elements for Implementation
  - Benefits and Risks
  - Measuring Impact
- ▶ Lessons learned template. A document that captures lessons uncovered throughout the course of the COP. These are less time intensive to develop than promising practices and are more a log of key learning that the members of the COP have found valuable. Fields may include:
- Issue Description
  - Lesson Learned
  - Real-Life Examples
- ▶ Trainings on or guides to conducting effective online training. A popular and effective use of COP time is to rotate trainings conducted by members of the COP. If the organizations do not have a background in conducting webinars or online meetings, the TA provider can provide this training to the COPs.
- ▶ Training or guides on effective use of online workspaces. You may have set up an online workspace for the COPs, but do they know how to use it? Elements of a training should include: Basics of the technology (i.e., how to join/log in), features that are available for use (discussion forum, shared calendar, file sharing, etc.), and best practices for using the technology with your particular COP (give examples of things they can do right away that show value, like posting a request for a specific resource or posting a great tool that they have created to share with the group).
- ▶ Collective TTA request form. Send a message to the COP that, as their TA provider, you are committed to helping provide resources and training that is important to the COP. Ensure that each COP has access to a form through which they can request TA or training for their entire COP.

## **SETTING UP COPS TO OUTLIVE YOUR TTA PROGRAM**

### **Considerations for Setting Up COPs to Outlive Your TTA Program**

One of the benefits of establishing COPs is that they may outlive a TTA program through the relationships formed and shared assets developed. After the completion of the TTA program, COPs may continue to meet on a less frequent basis. Their meetings may be less formal or structured as they may have fewer pressing concerns in common or experience other natural changes. Interactions between individuals may outnumber interactions among the entire group. The COP may opt to maintain a shared workspace through which to have virtual discussions and resource exchanges.

The key here is that the COP and its members continue to find value in interacting with one another and define, for themselves, the appropriate way to continue. Your role as a TA provider is to set up the COPs to continue extracting value long after the completion of your TTA activities.

## Activities for Setting Up COPs to Outlive Your TTA Program

As a TA provider, you can contribute to the likelihood that these relationships, problem solving, innovation, and learning continue beyond the formal TTA program. You may consider the following:

- **Acknowledging the transition.** As the TTA program winds down, acknowledge to members that though their COP may continue to meet, these meetings are likely to be very different from how things were when members were all receiving TTA and the leaders were receiving support from a TA provider. Note that the end of the TTA program does not necessarily mean the end of their COP, and your hope is that the relationships formed will continue to be valuable. Planting this seed a few weeks before the end of the TTA program will help members think about what they want from their COP beyond the course of the TTA program.
- **Recommending that COPs plan for the end of the TTA program.** COPs that are connected to TTA will lose the support of the TA provider at the end of the program. With this in mind, TA providers can be intentional about having the COPs consider the type of group they would like to have when this transition occurs. You might consider providing a modified action plan template, as described above in “Defining COPs.”
- **Providing a set of questions to help COPs explore what they value about the COP.** Encourage the team leader to use these questions to create a survey or to facilitate a discussion among the COP members. Create questions that both look back and look forward beyond the TTA program. Some questions may include:
  - ▶ What have been the most valuable aspects of your participation in the COP?
  - ▶ What individual relationships within the COP have been most beneficial to you and why?
  - ▶ How have you benefited from your participation in the COP?
  - ▶ How has your organization benefited from your participation in the COP?
  - ▶ What would you value from the COP going forward?
  - ▶ What do you envision for the COP in the future?
  - ▶ Will your organization support your ongoing participation in the COP? If so, why?
- **Collecting, collecting, collecting!** During the time when you are actively supporting the COPs, maintain good relationships with the leaders and periodically ask them for completed case studies, lessons learned, promising practices, and other documentation of innovations and problems solved that you can save and share across COPs and with future TTA participants.
- **Creating a shared work space for all members of all COPs.** Toward the end of your TTA program, invite all COP members to join an online workspace where they can find the items listed above from the other COPs. Though likely unmoderated, this helps create the potential for further collaboration and learning.
- **Encouraging COPs to document and set up resource-storing systems that will outlive the group.** Consider Jive, SharePoint, Google Docs, Wiggio, Ning, or any number of free and low-cost services that can be found by searching on the Internet.
- **Encouraging COP members to get connected on social networking sites.** Sites like LinkedIn and Facebook help ensure that professional connections remain intact and that any obstacles to getting back in touch as appropriate are reduced.
- **Creating groups for your COPs on social networking sites.** This will facilitate making contact with all members as needs arise down the road.

## **CONCLUSION**

Implementing communities of practice as part of your training and technical assistance program creates the possibility of deeper, more vibrant, and longer-lasting discourse to support your TTA program. Along with the expertise that you provide, the collective knowledge and experience of COP members will lead to contributions to the field, including the development of lessons learned, promising practices, and innovations. This will, in turn, deepen the skill and expertise of each COP member, the organizations they work for, and, if adequately tracked and captured, enhance the technical assistance provider's body of expertise and knowledge.

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