

## Communities of Practice as a Professional Development Tool for Management and Leadership Skills in Libraries

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### Introduction

Management literature has been assessing the value and impact of Communities of Practice (CoP) for almost three decades.<sup>1</sup> CoP are most commonly defined as “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 this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.”<sup>2</sup> Other definitions expand to include amorphous groups where people come and go as they need or desire, virtual groups, and groups that include people from outside the organization.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, we examine a CoP as a professional development opportunity. In August of 2012, the University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries gathered a small group of people to improve their management and leadership skills with the intent to work through the book *Be a Great Boss, One Year to Success*. This workbook authored by Catherine Hakala-Ausperk, is designed to enable readers to reflect and practice elements necessary to be a better boss. Through meeting and dialoging as a group, we formed a deep trust where difficult questions could be asked and honest conversations ensued. All participants felt that this group was a positive experience which enhanced our learning and growth as supervisors, yielded unexpected benefits of strong bonds within the group, and provided a system of ongoing collaboration and support.

While CoP and working collaboratively are common in libraries, CoP are rarely used as structured staff development tools to increase the management and leadership skills of their members. The CoP as a professional development format is unlike other training programs locally and nationally in that the learning takes place over an extended period of time. It incorporates follow up discussions to ensure practice and implementation of what was learned. Quite often, after a professional development training, staff have good intentions to implement aspects of what they have learned. However, due to a variety of reasons including workload, unanswered follow-up questions, or lack of accountability, the implementation never takes place or is not sustained. The slower pace and accountability to others in the Libraries CoP enabled members to identify areas to work on and take action to implement these ideas in order to obtain their goals.

This article will look at the successful implementation of a CoP to enhance management and leadership skills, including the challenges and accomplishments.

### Literature Review

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger first coined the term after describing a situational learning process as “legitimate peripheral participation<sup>4</sup>.” Their 1991 book, which investigated apprenticeship primarily within several professional communities, defined legitimate peripheral participation as “...the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice. A

person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participation in a sociocultural practice. This social process includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills.<sup>5</sup> They focused on the practice of participation and how members evolve through their shared learning and experiences.

Building on the concept of CoP, Brown and Duguid include the importance of shared stories and learning within organizations. One important distinguishing aspect of their work focuses on the importance of storytelling to building work culture and innovation. They define core characteristics of stories that "have a flexible generality that makes them both adaptable and particular. They function, rather like the common law, as a usefully underconstrained means to interpret each new situation in the light of accumulated wisdom and constantly changing circumstances" and that stories "also act as repositories of accumulated wisdom."<sup>6</sup> Stories become a critical step for organizational learning within communities of practice.

Since the introduction of the concept of CoP, much more has been written and investigated related to the development of these communities of shared learning and experience. Most notably, Wenger continued expanding on the concept of communities of practice and in 2002, along with McDermott and Snyder, defined communities of practice as "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 this area by interacting on an ongoing basis."<sup>7</sup> Their definition is not limited to people who work together, but includes people with shared interests and who see value in their community:

...they typically share information, insight, and advice. They help each other solve problems. They discuss their situations, their aspirations, and their needs. They ponder common issues, explore ideas, and act as sounding boards...they accumulate knowledge, they become informally bound by the value they find in learning together. This value is not merely instrumental for their work. It also accrues in the personal satisfaction of knowing colleagues who understand each other's perspective and of belonging to an interesting group of people.<sup>8</sup>

Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder argue some of the most crucial benefits of CoP are the relationships, knowledge, and culture CoP develop within their community that can expand outwards. For organizations, these are crucial tenets. Because CoP can develop among anyone with shared interests or communities, it is no wonder businesses see value in their cultivation and development.

While the development and success of CoP have strong historical backing and research, the discussion of their use in libraries and library staff development is not common. In academia, and especially in libraries, CoP are often written about in context to their impact on student learning or instructor benefits (i.e. information literacy), rather than in staff development. Although libraries frequently work in collaborative environments built around subject specific meetings, shadowing, internships, and formal/informal mentoring relationships, the term "communities of practice" is rarely used, even though it could be based on its definition. In their article, "Communities of Practice at an Academic Library," Kristin Henrich and Ramirose Attebury focus on the creation of CoP in a library, in this case for peer mentoring. They argue

that groups within the library can be an “indispensable part of a learning organization.”<sup>9</sup> The formation of these communities can bring about shared learning, experiences, and ideas. Henrich and Attebury also argue that best practices need to include some form of internal leadership and initiative (while being aware of power dynamics), good communication, and a sense of community.<sup>10</sup>

### **Evolution: From Book Club to CoP**

The CoP discussed in this paper began as a book club at the UW Madison Libraries after an employee — who would become a member of the first CoP cohort — brought Catherine Hakala-Ausperk’s book to the attention of library administration. From that small act, ideas flowed and the concept of forming a group to work through the chapters of the book formed. In August of 2012, four library supervisors were identified who would be open to the concept of learning in a CoP and would bring a unique perspective to it based on their experience, roles within the organization, and the management skills they had already demonstrated. A member of administration with human resources experience initially acted as the facilitator. This group was a grass-roots effort with common goals in mind: to learn more about management skills and to develop and practice those skills. Because of the time commitment and the small financial obligation to purchase Hakala-Ausperk’s book for the group, sponsorship by the Libraries’ Executive Committee was sought.

This original CoP did not set out to resolve any specific problems in the libraries but was intended to be a vehicle for learning. When the group was formed, we didn’t even think of ourselves as a CoP; if anything, we thought of ourselves as a “book club” with learning objectives. However, our goals were clear from the start: we wanted to slowly and methodically learn from the book and each other and implement what we learned. Because we met every month, we could follow up with each other and be accountable to the group to achieve the goals we individually set for ourselves. The original intent of the group was to meet once a month for several hours to cover a chapter in the book. The book is laid out into 12 chapters, each chapter consisting of four units which build around the chapter topic, all which relate to an aspect of library management. Ideally, the book is set up to complete in one year. Each person was committed to working through the chapter before the meeting. At the meeting, we discussed the chapter, how the information applied to our work, and what aspect of the management lesson we wanted to work on during the following month.

The members of this first group had each worked for the libraries for several years but were not familiar with one another due to the size of the library staff and participants being located in multiple buildings. Because of this, the group members needed to build trust with each other which happened over the first few months as we shared our stories, current management struggles, and questions. As we moved through the chapters of the book we also shared how we were each working to improve our skills as managers and leaders. The ability of group members to be vulnerable with each other led to strong bonds and the meetings of this group became an event on the calendar that participants would look forward to. In addition, this group formulated ideas on areas of improvement for the libraries and turned those ideas into action. For example, we identified the libraries mentorship program as languishing and

developed ideas on how to rejuvenate this program which led to launching a revised, and much stronger, mentorship program. Had it not been for the CoP, this cohort may never have had the chance to gather and engage in honest conversations around topics that had impact far beyond our units.

Although the Libraries at the University of Wisconsin-Madison still has a formal staff-mentoring program, the members of our “book club” wanted to develop a CoP for staff free from the power dynamics that are normally at play in mentoring relationships. We envisioned a community where staff with different values, perspectives, and experiences could grow and innovate together. Our goal was to create a space where all participants would be able to learn through participation, storytelling, experience, and relationship building. We aimed to create “collaborative, informal networks that support professional practitioners in their efforts to develop shared understandings and engage in work-relevant knowledge building,” which we officially names the GLS Supervisor Community of Practice.<sup>11</sup>

Although the group’s intention was to meet every month to discuss a chapter, this plan was altered in many ways. The group had originally agreed that it would not meet unless all members could be present. Considering the busy schedules of the group, this proved to be an ongoing challenge. Many meetings were cancelled at the last minute and rescheduled due to unavoidable conflicts. Also, when the group gathered we would often check in to see if anyone had any topics they wanted to discuss. There were many times that we would end up talking about a topic that we were currently dealing with in the library instead of addressing the book chapter, thus delaying the completion of the program.

As the initial group progressed, it became obvious that we could merge *Be a Great Boss, One Year to Success* with a growing initiative on campus called Leadership@UW.<sup>12</sup> Leadership@UW works to facilitate a shared vision and common language for leadership at UW-Madison. We learned many lessons in the first iteration of the group and this led to a more focused effort for the second group which included incorporating Leadership@UW from the start, more focus on self-assessment and replacing some of the chapters of the book which were not as relevant to our library system with more appropriate topics and readings.

## Implementation

After two years of meeting and developing a cohort based on trust and shared learning, the members of our informal “book club” recognized the benefit of sharing their experiences, growth, and community beyond our small group. Therefore, in 2015, with the support of the Libraries’ Executive Committee, two CoP for supervisors were developed. One group focused on supervisors of permanent staff and the other on supervisors of students. A division was made between permanent and student supervisors due to the differences in policies and laws which govern the two groups and the variance in complexity of supervising permanent staff versus a transient workforce. A GLS libraries-wide call went out seeking applicants to our new CoP. The groups were intentionally not limited to current supervisors but welcomed anyone who wanted to learn more about supervision. From this call, we were able to create two groups of five members each, with two members from the original group acting as facilitators. Originally,

we could not place all of those who expressed interest but due to turnover soon after the groups were formed, everyone who originally expressed interest received a spot on a CoP. The two new groups — the Permanent Staff Supervisors Community of Practice and the Student Staff Supervisors Community of Practice — officially launched in January 2016.

Each newly formed CoP was comprised of members from different departments and management experiences throughout the organization. In many instances, members had no previous experiences or opportunities to work closely with the other members of their CoP, even though they may have been colleagues for years. We intentionally organized membership around staff with similar supervisory positions and with a willingness to engage in practice and learning in order to develop their supervisory experience. Another key component was ensuring each group was free from power dynamics sometimes experienced in other learning opportunities or meetings throughout our organization. We felt strongly that supervisors should not be in a community of practice with their staff, in order to allow for an honest and truthful sharing experience, so they were intentionally not included in the same CoP. To begin building trust among members, a large part of the first meeting was used to establish ground rules for the community. We started with the following:

- What is shared here stays here, what is learned here leaves here.
- Share air time.
- Listen. Attempt to understand other people's perspectives.
- Respect the ideas of others, even if you don't agree.
- Inquire to understand.
- Engage with empathy.
- Create safe space for discussion.
- Clearly state goals for meetings and tasks.
- Expect members' full engagement and participation in and between meetings.

Although not required, each group interestingly ended up adopting the same suggested ground rules above and decided not to add additional ones. Another method used for building trust was to maintain a static membership. Unlike other CoP, we chose not to add new members throughout the yearlong program. We purposefully kept it a small, consistent group, with the intention of having CoP “graduates” lead the next iteration of our communities. We had intended the communities to last around a year but, like the first cohort, these groups continued much longer, even after the book was completed. They morphed into true communities of colleagues who continued to share best practices and learn together throughout the years.

In addition to the communities continuing to meet after they had completed the book, we often found that meeting topics fluctuated each month. While the topics for each meeting were tied to chapters in the book or Leadership@UW, topics changed with pressing issues or experiences that members wanted to discuss. Perhaps the most impactful trait of our communities was to practice action learning: “...working on real problems, focusing on learning, and actually implementing solutions.”<sup>13</sup> Self-reflection, assessment, and a willingness to discuss pressing issues allowed our group to develop a culture of sharing and growing together as a community of supervisors. Ultimately, we gained the benefit of developing a trusted group of colleagues who are now resources for each other if/when issues or opportunities develop.

## Impact

In January 2018, we implemented an informal, anonymous, and comment-based Google Form survey, sent to all CoP participants, to gauge the expectations and impacts of our Supervisor CoP's. Out of 15 potential respondents, from all cohorts, we had 12 members respond. While the survey focused on several factors we wanted to assess, themes related to shared learning, professional growth, and community were prevalent throughout all responses.

Respondents were asked why they decided to participate in the CoP and to specify expectations they had related to this experience. Overwhelmingly, respondents expressed interest in learning from others and potential growth as reasons for joining. One respondent envisioned "a safe community for discussion of confidential and potentially sensitive topics" and one that "would encourage one another to grow in our roles as supervisors." Others shared expectations of "growth and learning" while sharing their "practices as a supervisor as well as gleaming [sic] information from my fellow supervisors."

Aside from one respondent's concerns regarding the inability to consistently schedule meetings throughout the months and a few comments on the book's contents, in general, respondents expressed that the expectations they had prior to participating in the CoP were mostly met: "My experience in my CoP has largely mirrored my expectations, though we have spent more time sharing and supporting one another than I had expected, which is wonderful."

Statements like this and another stating, "All supervisors should have a community of practice. Supervisors are generally too isolated," helped demonstrate that there was a need in the libraries for a community of sharing for supervisors, and that the community we set out to create was achieved. In fact, since the creation of our initial reading group, each of those members have taken on additional supervision of staff. We cannot state this is a direct effect of the CoP or rather the selection of highly motivated and knowledgeable staff. Still, as one respondent stated, "I think we need to be doing more to foster connections between different units and libraries in the GLS [University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries]. Being a supervisor/manager should include opportunities for lifelong learning!" The Libraries agree with this sentiment and continues to support the success of these CoP through having the Executive Committee host graduation celebrations, including a certificate of completion.

## Future

As we look forward to building new cohorts we are asking ourselves better assessment questions in an effort to continue to ensure these CoP are productive and provide opportunities for growth and reflection. Better utilization of tools to self-reflect and ensure participants are working on improving at least one area of supervision each month could also improve the overall learning and experience.

As observations of the CoP continue, we are even more aware of the key role of the facilitator in helping the groups overcome the first and largest challenge: building trust. We are

also aware of power dynamics between the group and the facilitators; it is important that the facilitators are aware of the power dynamics and how they must use this power to ebb and flow with the group. In the past, the facilitator has held a higher management position than the members of the group. The facilitator needs to understand how this power dynamic can affect people's willingness to comment on certain topics and that, at times, the group may be seeking advice from the facilitator(s) due to their role within the organization. Facilitators in the second iteration acknowledged they initially talked more than they wanted to in an effort to help the group to build trust and community. Facilitators also need to understand the strengths that both introverts and extroverts bring to the group and how to use those strengths to support the group. Through this process, we learned of the necessity for skilled facilitators and the responsibility of administration to ensure that those who lead future groups received some training in facilitation.

Moving forward, we are partnering facilitators from the first and second cohorts to launch four additional CoP, two for supervisors of students and two for supervisors of permanent staff. We aim to keep the participation of each group at approximately four group members and two facilitators.

The group also feels that Hakala-Ausperk's book is a useful tool and aligns to UW-Madison's leadership definition provided by the Leadership@UW Framework to guide discussions and learning. Additional supplemental readings will be chosen based on input from past participants and others to identify the most relevant articles.

Although this level of professional development is time consuming and labor intensive, participants expressed that it is a good use of their time for developing and implementing management and leadership skills and networks which will be essential to their future success. As one participant commented, "This was an excellent experience and one I would highly recommend to others. I think bringing in the campus Leadership Framework (Leadership@UW) tied in nicely to what we were doing and added more community to our effort."

Support from libraries' administration and management also sent a clear message to participants that the Libraries were invested in them and supported their development opportunities. A comment on the survey clearly reflected this view: "... except to say that I'm so grateful to be a part of the organization that sees value in this type of group and that gives the attendees the space to be involved." CoP at the UW-Madison Libraries have made a positive impact on employees' abilities to learn and implement management and leadership skills while also building a network of trusted colleagues who can help them along their path of life-long learning.

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## Appendix

### General Library System Supervisor Communities of Practice Experience

1. Why did you want to join the General Library System Supervisor Communities of Practice?  
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2. What expectations did you have prior to starting or meeting your community?  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. Did this experience meet your expectations?

*Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

Maybe

4. Please explain why you select yes, no, or maybe above regarding whether this experience met your expectations?  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. In general, what has the experience been like?  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. What have you learned from this experience?  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. Has your experience helped you implement anything you learned, or have you developed new ideas?  
\_\_\_\_\_

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8. Would you recommend the experience to others in the GLS?

*Mark only one oval.*

Yes

No

Maybe