Communities of practice:
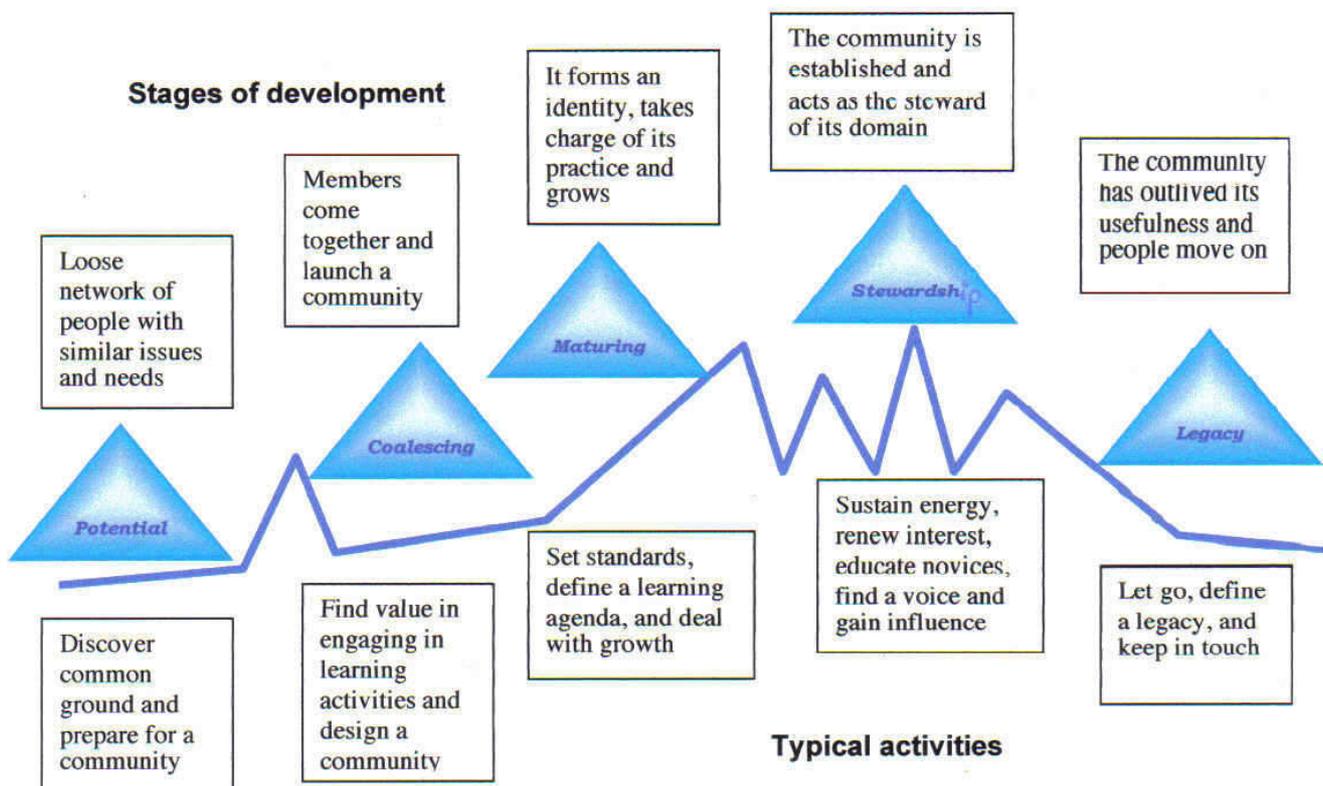# Development stages

by Etienne Wenger

Living things grow. They are not born in their final state, but evolve through successive transformations. This process continues until it is time for them to die. The baby you were holding in your arms seventeen years ago was quite different from the teenager you just dropped out at the theater, who is again quite different from the adult she will be in another seventeen years when she'll make you a grandfather. Her needs, capabilities, and aspirations are so radically transformed that she may hardly be recognizable, and yet she remains the same person. While she is changing everyday, there are identifiable stages in her development.

So with communities of practice. Like living things, they go through a natural cycle of birth, growth, and death. Like living things, they start as a mere potential, they develop progressively into their mature state, and then continue to evolve until they are no longer relevant. Many go through such radical transformations that the reasons they stay together have but a tenuous relation to the reasons they came together in the first place. While communities of practice evolve continually, we have observed a number of distinct stages they go through. These are illustrated in Figure 1. The jagged line stands for the level of energy and visibility that the community generates over time.

A developmental model with a sequence of stages is useful in providing some direction, but such a model cannot be taken too literally. It must be considered indicative rather than prescriptive. These stages and their sequence are merely typical and there can be wide variations in the ways communities experience them. Just as many of us still experience their adolescence at fifty or some children have to grow up very quickly to deal with dramatic circumstances, communities vary widely in their developmental sequence. Some communities go through one stage or another very quickly; others spend much time in this same stage. Some seem to skip a stage and may have to go back and deal with earlier issues; others combine two stages and deal with all the issues at the same time. Some do not make it all the way through. Still, having a sense of stages and associated issues helps you foresee problems you are likely to face, understand the changing needs of the community, and take appropriate action. It helps you be patient when a community needs to deal with its development in its own time and prod appropriately when it is ready to move on

Stage 1. Potential

At this stage, the community is often not quite a community yet. It is rather a loose network of people who interact occasionally around a situation or interest. Yet like an embryo, it already comprises some basic elements of a community and has the full potential of becoming one. At some point, the idea of forming a community is introduced into this loose network and this prospect starts to redirect people's attention. Private conversations intensify and people start to see their relationships in a new light. As the sense of a shared domain develops, the need for more systematic interactions emerges and generates interest. Someone often steps up to take some
responsibility for getting the community started. Some have gone on a round of interviews with potential members to find out what the main issues are. Others have just called a preliminary meeting to discuss the formation of a community.

Stages of development

Loose network of people with similar issues and needs

Members come together and launch a community

It forms an identity, takes charge of its practice and grows

The community is established and acts as the steward of its domain

The community has outlived its usefulness and people move on

Potential

Coalescing

Maturing

Stewardship

Legacy

Discover common ground and prepare for a community

Find value in engaging in learning activities and design a community

Set standards, define a learning agenda, and deal with growth

Sustain energy, renew interest, educate novices, find a voice and gain influence

Let go, define a legacy, and keep in touch

Typical activities

Budding communities are everywhere. Developing a community of practice does not start in a vacuum. You cannot just pull a community together as you would a team. You must build on existing interests and relationships. For any important topic in an organization, there is usually an informal group of people already interested in it. Whether they are merely a loose network or have already taken some steps toward becoming a community of practice, these are the people who are likely to form the core group of the community and take leadership in pulling it together. If you overlook what these people are doing and try to start a community out of the blue, you will trigger all their cynicism about corporate initiatives that are disconnected from the lived reality of organizations. Whether a community starts spontaneously or is seeded by the organization, its success depends on the initiative of people who have a connection to the domain, recognize the potential for the community, and are in a position to build on it.

Stage 2. Coalescing

Now the community is born, but it is still in its infancy. Members have had their hopes raised by the discovery of the potential of their community and their commitment to get it going, but the value of the community still has to become a reality in their lives. One community was only convinced of its value after members started solving problems together.

This stage is a particularly fragile time in community development and it is important to understand the needs of this transitional stage. There is often a spike of interest and energy around this time, for instance, right after a launch event. As the community seeks to find a rhythm, however, the reality of the work that community development requires sets in. After the initial interest, people's energy for the community can fall off sharply. Other commitments pull people away from participating, leaders don't

really know what to do to keep the energy alive, people expect—and don't always find—great immediate value. People may interpret the loss of interest as a lack of real value or become impatient. Building relationships, helping each other, discovering what knowledge is really useful to share, all this takes time and it is important to shepherd the community through this stage. It needs to build stronger bonds among community members and create enough energy and momentum to sustain members through this initial work.

When this stage is successful, the interplay of public and private spaces starts to function. Discussions that draw in potential community members become public. The organized forms of community life— weekly meetings, documents, web sites—become established. There may be a launch workshop where a community design is discussed. At the same time, private interactions become more systematic. People get to know each other better. They know who to call for help. As members connect more, they frequently find more common ground and begin to find opportunities to help each other and start sharing tools, templates, and tips. The community begins to take shape and have a presence in the experience of members.

Stage 3. Maturing

After establishing the value of learning together, the community needs to go one step deeper into the domain and develop a more focused communal identity. Now that the community has coalesced, people know that they do have some useful things to share, that relationships between community members are enduring, and that the community has enough resilience to survive. Like an adolescent looking at the world toward adulthood, the community realizes that it has a whole life to live and that it needs to take charge of its destiny.

At this point a community is ready to develop a self-conscious identity as a community. Building a communal identity is a significant departure from merely generating value for participants and for the organization by addressing problems that arise or sharing ideas that have worked well. It takes self-awareness, focus, and alignment. Being intentional about establishing a shared practice requires greater commitment and in-depth discussions. The activities of the community become more focused and systematic about establishing standards for recurring problems and routine operations, finding gaps in its knowledge, and undertaking projects to close them. It often needs some additional resources from the organization. It also needs to become more systematic about involving all the relevant participants. This can disrupt the informal intimacy of the initial group and in some communities there has been some resistance on the part of some groups. But they often end up recognizing that these steps make the community ready to take increasing responsibility for stewarding knowledge in its domain.

Stage 4. Stewardship

Now the community has established its identity as a community. Yet this is only the beginning of its active life. As a child, you always think that adults are stable. You are just searching for an elusive identity but they know who they are. You have one false start after another, but they progress by pursuing a clear path. Only when you get to this once-distant adulthood yourself do you realize that the stability of adults is more a matter of assuming responsibilities that demand a steady focus than an internal state of psychological accomplishment. Adults too go through constant changes as they grow older.

Similarly, communities of practice continue to change after they have reached their maturity. Like other living things, they respond to their environment, but also shape that environment. They expand their

focus, address new problems, and undertake new projects. They become a complex set of activities, relationships, and subgroups with special interests. They usually keep growing, accommodating successive generations of members. As new members join and as new issues arise, the community needs to redirect its focus to meet the needs of its changing membership. Leaders often leave, either because they burn out or because they feel they want to move on. The community needs to find new leaders. As members settle into a routine, they need to find new sources of inspiration. All these changes—in focus, in membership, in relationships with the organization and the world—bring new challenges and opportunities that keep mature communities on their toes. Some communities even go through mid-life crises during which they question their value and their very existence. It is often useful to have renewal events—similar to a launch, but building on a longer history—to give community members a chance to reflect together on their achievements, their lessons learned, and the value they produce, and to outline a path forward.

Although one may assume that maturity is the end of community-development efforts, there is still much to do. Taking explicit responsibility for stewarding expertise in its domain means developing its practice to its full potential. To this end, the community has to start thinking strategically about the knowledge it has accumulated and the knowledge it needs to create. It has to maintain energy and explore the leading edge of its practice. It must also start looking more systematically for sources of expertise it can tap. It seeks relationships with related groups outside its direct organizational context, in other parts of the company or in other organizations.

During the stewardship stage, communities of practice often turn their attention to their relationships with the organization and other groups. They seek to influence the organization in which they live. Now that they have established their practice, they hope to have a voice that reflects the authority they have achieved with respect to their domain. One community, for instance, was really angry because the organization had proceeded with an acquisition in their domain without consulting them. Thinking strategically about developing their knowledge, they also start thinking strategically about what their domain means to the organization.

Stage 5. Legacy

Like all living things, communities of practice must eventually meet their end and make room for new life. Their domain may no longer be relevant and members go on to other interests and activities. Some communities also merge with others. Alternatively, a domain may have become so complex that it no longer makes sense to keep one community and the original community splits into a series of distinct ones. In any case, the public space of the community fades away, though some alumni may still keep in touch privately.

Unlike a team whose work is finished when it has accomplished its task, a community of practice does not have an ending programmed in its definition. Still, ending is an integral part of its natural evolution. Though you don't plan the demise of a community, you are ready for this stage when it is time to move on and to consider the legacy the community wants to leave behind. Some communities may outlive their usefulness. This is one of the dangers of overinstitutionalizing a community: like all institutional entities, it will tend to want to survive for its own sake. Another reason is that a community creates a deep sense of connection and identification. Community members may therefore need some help letting go in a way that both honors the community and closes it down.

Over the course of the life of a community, all three elements evolve. The domain evolves from an individual interest to a shared interest, a source of communal identity, and an object of joint stewardship. The community evolves from a loose network of personal relationships to a bond between members, a sense of craft intimacy, and a experience of collective engagement as stewards. The practice evolves from finding common problems, to helping each other, to developing a common baseline of knowledge, to world-class expertise, to leaving a legacy.

Making the end an integral part of the lifecycle model is recognition that death is a natural part of the process of living. Because a community depends on the passion of its members, its death always remains a possibility at any point in its development. This makes its will to live an expression of the human spirit and whatever legacy it leaves behind more meaningful.