

Tip Sheet Series

Communities of Practice: The key to a more collaborative and innovative workforce.

One of the greatest challenges for any organisation is how to access, develop, nurture, use and retain the knowledge that resides within it.

Organisations address this challenge by developing good computer and workflow systems, writing procedure and induction manuals, maintaining their databases and honing the skills of their staff through training and professional development. This is great – but very often the most fundamental and effective way of doing this is overlooked – that is by establishing internal **Communities of Practice**.

What is a Community of Practice in an organisational context?

It is a group of people who are empowered to learn from and with each other. CoPs provide the opportunity for people to extend as well as contribute their knowledge.

Very often people create their own informal communities within organisations e.g.

- The group of teachers chatting in the lunchroom about how they handle difficult students
- Frontline staff sharing their experiences while waiting at the bus stop every afternoon
- The manager who uses regularly staff meeting time to brainstorm solutions to business challenges.



These are all examples of people sharing knowledge which can ultimately:

- Improve their workplace performance and productivity
- Generate new solutions and responses to challenges
- Contribute to the collective knowledge base of an organisation.

If this informal process can be captured and formalised into an organisation's best-practice procedures, it has the capacity to significantly improve:

- Collaborative problem-solving
- Team communication and effectiveness
- Innovative responses to issues through the synthesis of shared knowledge

How do you implement a Community of Practice in your workplace?

Every workplace has a number of issues that need brainstorming, problem-solving, documentation, collaboration, analysis etc. Address these by helping people with common goals, interests and a stake in the outcome of these issues, to form some connections that are outside of the formal structures they may already be operating in. In other words combine people from different teams or sections of the

organisation with the common interest of collaboratively working on a particular issue. The key criteria are that the members of the *CoP*:

- Operate in the context of a particular area of interest or need
- Interact and learn from each other
- Implement that learning in their professional practice.



For example I recently conducted a workshop called *Presenting Complex Content Clearly* for a government organisation whose officers frequently had to deliver talks and presentations to various stakeholders, organisations and community groups. Based on the principles I had covered in the workshop the participants revised various sections of their content and then presented them to their colleagues followed by feedback which I facilitated. For many it was the first time they had seen others in their division present as it was not general practice to attend each other's presentations.

All the participants found the process extremely valuable as they were able to give and receive excellent feedback to improve their own presentations as well as those of their colleagues. Realising the value of tapping into each other's expertise in this way, several of them committed to meeting on a regular basis to review and critique each other's presentations as they evolved.

Communities of Practice can be set up very easily in any organisation, are extremely effective and have a number of associated benefits. These are:

- The transfer of skills and knowledge across different sections of an organisation
- The cross-fertilisation of ideas through people who may not otherwise have occasion to interact
- The accessing of tacit knowledge resident within the organisation that would otherwise not be tapped into as a resource. (Tacit knowledge is that huge body of information, experience and wisdom we all have but don't even realise we have).

Contact Irena if you need some help in leveraging your organisation's knowledge resources.

Dr. Irena Yashin-Shaw's cutting edge keynote presentations and workshops offer unique perspectives on how to achieve a culture of creativity and innovation within your workplace or team. They are ideal for professional development days, strategic planning meetings, conferences and think-tanks. Contact Irena for more information.

Based on her highly acclaimed and internationally published doctoral research into creative problem-solving, she delivers meaty content and inspired insights packaged in a highly entertaining format.



Her *keynote* topics include:

- *From Creativity to Innovation*: Discover the secrets of how to generate, capture and implement your great ideas!
- *From Wow to Kapow*: How to turbo-charge your thinking and problem-solving by learning to use some simple but powerful cognitive tools.
- *Thinking Strategically in a World of Change*: Understand the global trends that require us to maintain a mindset of innovation and how we can meet that challenge on a day to day basis.
- *The Power of Perspective Shifting*: How to accelerate business success and live life to the fullest by seeing things from different points of view.

Her *workshop* topics include:

- *Innovation Skills for the Public Sector*: Shows public sector leaders how to take or administer 'baby steps' to achievable innovation.
- *Thinking Beyond Boundaries*: Learn a proven method to unlock the enormous potential stored within all of us.
- *Thinking Leadership*: How to become a question-asking leader who encourages new ideas.
- *Presenting Complex Content Clearly*: How to deliver information so that it is easily understood, remembered and used.

Feel free to pass on this tip sheet and print it out or use it in your own publications. All I ask is that you include the following tag line "This article was written by Dr. Irena Yashin-Shaw PhD of *Innovation Edge* and *Speaking Edge*. Irena is a learning and development expert who shows people how to think to innovate and speak to influence. Contact Irena on 0411 330 301 or irena@speakingedge.com.au