

# Five Building Blocks for Effective Communities of Practice



IPA's Thriving Through Play Community of Practice in-person meeting, Dubai, 2025.

## Overview

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are increasingly used by funders and implementing partners to strengthen collaboration, improve evidence use, and support adaptive learning. This brief summarizes insights from nine CoPs supported by IPA and The LEGO Foundation. Findings are organized into five building blocks that represent the core design and operational conditions needed for effective CoPs. The [full report](#) provides deeper analysis, richer examples, and detailed methodological information.

### Building Block 1: Start with Clear Goals and Assess Fit

Across the CoPs reviewed, many were launched with broad aspirations but lacked a clear, shared understanding of what success should look like. CoPs work best when funders, learning partners, and members align early on realistic goals and have a clear plan for achieving them.

- **Clear, realistic goals** that meet a shared purpose are essential to determine whether a CoP is the right mechanism.
- **Balanced goals** aim to address both funders' interests in portfolio-level learning and synthesis as well as members' interest in practical learning to improve implementation.
- **Enabling conditions matter** for certain goals—policy influence benefits from existing policy relationships, and learning synthesis is enabled by harmonized data and dedicated facilitation time.

Establishing goals early—and revisiting them regularly—helps maintain focus and ensures the CoP remains relevant as contexts evolve.

The most successful (green) to least successful (blue) CoP goals.



**KNOWLEDGE SHARING  
ITERATIVE LEARNING**



**MEL CAPACITY BUILDING**



**POLICY INFLUENCE  
LEARNING SYNTHESIS**



**COMMUNITY BUILDING**

## Building Block 2: Build Strong Foundations

Successful CoPs benefitted from key enabling conditions: common ground, trust, and committed facilitation.

- **Common Ground**, such as similar program models, monitoring evaluation and learning (MEL) needs, or implementation challenges, created meaningful overlaps that propelled CoP progress. Diversity on these factors can create richness, but can be a challenge when applying shared learning or synthesizing evidence are intended outcomes.
- **Trusted Relationships** were a prerequisite for the open sharing at the heart of collaborative learning. CoPs with some pre-existing relationships more quickly built momentum towards their goals. Where trust was absent, in-person convenings and relationship-building activities helped pave the way for constructive peer learning.
- **Learning Partner Facilitation** was central to establishing early foundations—clear goals, aligned expectations, ways of working, and tangible early benefits. Their ability to bridge perspectives among funders and members shaped engagement towards shared goals.

## Building Block 3: Balance Roles and Leadership

Successful CoPs benefited from clear, balanced, and evolving roles across funders, learning partners and members. When each stakeholder understands their responsibilities and contributes unique strengths, CoPs can navigate inherent power dynamics to maintain constructive momentum.

- **Funders** provide resources for convenings, facilitation and time for members to prepare contributions; offer strategic direction; maintain commitment. Over-involvement can inhibit open discussion, but too little participation can weaken member engagement and overall direction. Selective participation—combined with clear communication on expectations and commitment—helps strike the right balance.
- **Learning Partners** serve as coordinators, facilitators, synthesizers, and connectors. Learning partners often carry substantial responsibility without formal authority, making early role clarity essential. Their neutrality is vital for trust and balanced participation, which means avoiding dual roles that include project or program evaluation.
- **Members** bring practical experience, shape discussions, apply learnings and contribute to collective outputs. CoPs were stronger when members gradually took on leadership roles—facilitating sessions, leading thematic discussions, or acting as “champions” within sub-groups.

Recognizing and managing power dynamics within CoPs supported psychological safety and resulted in richer exchanges.

## Building Block 4: Design Participation Intentionally

Effective CoPs invested in purposeful design before, during, and after convenings. This kept members engaged over time and ensured that learning translated into practical program improvements and collective outcomes. Effective practices for CoP facilitators include:

### Before Convenings

- Engage members in **co-designing** agendas.
- Use **one-on-one** preparation between the learning partner and each member to refine inputs, verify data, and align expectations.
- Where relevant, prepare structured templates to ensure **coherent contributions**.

### During Convenings

- Balance **conceptual learning** with practical, context-specific problem-solving.
- Use **small groups** for deeper exchange, especially when tackling implementation challenges.
- Incorporate **trust-building activities**, from low-stakes icebreakers to playful metaphors, to encourage openness and honest reflection.

### After Convenings

- Synthesize **clear, actionable takeaways** to guide follow-through.
- Use quick **feedback loops** to refine future sessions.
- Provide **individual follow-up** to support application of learning and maintain momentum.

Choices about when to meet in person, when to connect virtually, and how to maintain momentum in between, play an important role in shaping CoP engagement. The most effective CoPs combined formats to balance relationship-building with practical work and regular touchpoints.

- **In-Person Convenings** built trust, strengthened relationships, and enabled deeper problem-solving. In person formats are especially valuable at the start of a CoP.
- **Online Sessions** maintained momentum, enabled broad participation, and supported work on focused topics or quick updates.
- **Hybrid Models** were the most effective approach, blending periodic in-person sessions with regular virtual touchpoints. One-on-one check-ins by learning partners between sessions reinforced commitments and supported applied learning.

## Guidance for Stakeholders

### For Funders

- Clarify the intent of the CoP and required commitment from the outset.
- Resource convenings as well as the coordination needed between them.
- Participate selectively to signal support without overshadowing member voices.

### For Learning Partners

- Facilitate alignment on goals, structure preparation, convenings and follow-up, and synthesize learning.
- Build trust early and maintain neutrality in mixed-power groups.
- Provide tailored MEL and implementation support to help members apply insights.

### For Members

- Participate consistently and bring practical experience into discussions.
- Apply CoP learning within their organizations and share results, raising challenges for collective reflection.
- Take on leadership roles as the CoP matures.

## Conclusion

When CoPs are built with clear goals, strong foundations, intentional design, balanced roles, and fit-for-purpose formats, they become powerful mechanisms for collaborative learning and program improvement.

Want to know more? The [full report](#) brings these building blocks to life with examples and more detailed findings, and provides the methodological foundation for these recommendations.

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