



PHIN CoPs Resource Kit

Launch and Sustain a Community of Practice

Launch and Sustain a Community of Practice

This section of the Resource Kit discusses the process used to launch a new community of practice and provides guidance for ensuring your community maintains productive momentum. If you are a member of a CoP but do not know the current stage of your Community, please refer to the Resources Section of the Resource Kit and complete the [“In What Phase is my CoP?”](#) quiz.

Get Started

If you have an idea for a PHIN-related CoP, it is important to determine if this community is already in existence. The CoP Community may exist in another format such as an informal working group, technical club, recurring lunch meeting, or message board community. If you are able to find a group of people already acting as a CoP in your domain, you may decide to suggest the group consider aligning with PHIN to gain access to the resources and support system offered currently offered the Community. Please refer to the [Aligning with PHIN](#) section of the Resource Kit and learn how your community can align with PHIN.

Once you have determined that your domain of interest does not already exist in the form of a CoP, there are steps you can follow to develop and grow your Community. These steps include [Plan](#), [Launch](#), and [Sustain and Evolve](#).

Plan

Get Focused

As stated in the Introduction to CoPs section of the Resource Kit, each Community of Practice consists of three primary characteristics: a domain, a related community, and a common practice. To identify a potential CoP, it may be helpful to brainstorm functional and technical areas that are not covered by an existing PHIN CoP—or perhaps there is a particular niche already covered by a PHIN Community of Practice that deserves a greater focus. Topics best suited to a CoP connect a wide range of people who

otherwise would not have the opportunity to interact or have an available channel to share best practices, discuss common problems, and collaboratively create solutions. It may be helpful to identify topics that are currently the subject of a particularly vexing problem or are widely debated. Keep in mind that the topic needs to be interesting to a number of other people, and should relate to PHIN.

Once you have an idea for a domain CoP, you will need to identify three to five potential members and ask several questions to identify topics of interest, possible issues, and potential leaders. Please refer to the [“Could it be a CoP”](#) worksheet, located in the Resources Section, for ideas and these questions.

After discussing and agreeing upon the CoP idea with others in your domain, collectively meet and begin drafting a charter. While you can expect the charter to evolve once the CoP has been launched, coming together to begin to establish the CoP mission, scope, goals, and objectives will aid in ensuring all prospective members understand the future direction of the Community. As potential members will guide the direction of the CoP over time, it is important not to

Just Remember....

Gaining Focus is about Converging, not laying concrete. While the lack of a salient vision or clearly defined goals can certainly lead to trouble, it is also important to keep things moving at an adequate pace. As you are forming a CoP, discover strategic objectives and come together with other community leaders to steward the community as it matures.

“Planning a community is more a matter of finding the triggers to catalyze evolution than creating a full design. The overall goal in the planning stage is to promote community development around each of the three key elements – domain, community and practice – by defining the community’s focus, identifying and building relationships between members, and identifying topics and projects that would be exciting for community members.”¹

over-strategize or limit the potential growth of the community when first creating the charter.⁶ For suggestions about what to include in the charter, please refer to the [“CoP Charter Template”](#), located in the Resources Section.

Within your charter, you may want to document community expectations (rules of behavior) that present guidelines for participation in the CoP. These guidelines will describe the basic principles of the Community’s culture, such as a commitment to a collaborative approach, processes around confidentiality and privacy, and the technological infrastructure that will initially support the community. For more information on creating community expectations, please refer to the document located on the Resources Section entitled [“Community Expectations”](#).

Once you have decided to form a CoP and drafted the charter, it is time to select leaders, choose collaboration resources, and develop collaboration guidelines.

How to Identify Leaders in Your CoP

According to Etienne Wenger, a key feature of successful CoPs is a “skillful and reputable coordinator.”¹ Since CoP membership and leadership is voluntary, it is beneficial to divide responsibilities among members to reduce the workload of any one individual.

There are two primary roles that need to be filled at the time of CoP Initiation: Community Leader and Community Sponsor.

- **Community Leader: Guides the Community’s Purpose and Strategic Intent**—A Community Leader likely “owns” the charter of the group. He or she may have ideas about what the goals of the group should be, how to reach them, and effectively engages others to collectively chart the CoPs’ course. This person helps the group stay focused on its particular domain and helps provide solutions for issues that may arise.
- **Community Sponsor: Champions the Community Internally and Externally** — This person likely has close relationships with leaders in the domain and related communities. He or she is highly motivated to ensure that the community succeeds and encourages member participation. This person champions the community’s successes and advocates for the community’s needs. The sponsor legitimizes the CoP and may also provide perspectives and resources, periodically review progress and developmental needs, and build collaborative relationships with officials or sponsors from other agencies.^{7,8} Refer to the [“Request an Executive Sponsor”](#), located in the Resources Section as a guide on how to engage a sponsor and communicate his or her responsibilities.

Other responsibilities (listed below) also need to be addressed as a Community of Practice launches. Each responsibility need not belong to a single individual; rather, responsibilities should be divided among several individuals.

- **Council Representation**—Each community needs representation in the CoPC to ensure the Community has an equal voice and is informed of PHIN Community activities.
- **Knowledge Management**—Over time, the CoP will likely develop a large repository of information. While this task may be small at first, it will grow in size with increasingly responsibility for organizing and posting community documents (charter, agendas, meeting minutes, etc.) to a common repository and helping to shape the information into knowledge.

Just Remember....

Strong Leadership is essential in the start-up of any new CoP. In the beginning, two key roles should be filled: the Sponsor and the Leader. A strong sponsor is needed to support the vision and the process of the community and champion the community internally and externally. A key leader nurtures the community from infancy and tackles the initial challenges, logistical and otherwise, that the group may face.

“The key to successful communities of practice is an appropriate leadership infrastructure that guides, supports and renews the community initiative over time. In every case we are familiar with, leadership is the most critical success factor for community participation and effectiveness.”⁷

- **Meeting Facilitation**—To ensure each member has a chance to speak, that meetings stay on track, and meeting goals are accomplished, a member needs to facilitate during Community meetings. Refer to the [“Facilitation Tip Sheet”](#) located in the Resources Section for additional information.
- **Relationship Management**—As new members join a CoP, it is important they feel welcome and have the opportunity to meet other members. To strengthen these relationships, it is important that a member be responsible for making introductions and connecting new and old members.
- **Subject Matter Expertise**—The CoP you launch is based on a PHIN technology or function. To begin conversations on this topic, it is important that related topics and hot button issues are identified, and experts who are able to contribute to the conversations are brought in for discussion. To gain more insight on this topic, please read the [“SME Tip Sheet”](#) located in the Resources Section.
- **Technology Management**—A crucial tool needed by a CoP is an easy-to-use, accessible communication vehicle. You may choose to begin using an e-mail distribution list, or you may choose to use a message board. A member will need to be responsible for identifying the tool(s) your group will use, ensuring members have access, and that the tools work as expected. Refer to the Resources Section [“Technology Management Tip Sheet”](#) for more information.
- **Communication Management**—It is important to identify a community member who will manage effective distribution of the CoP’s messages externally, seeking ways to promote and share the knowledge products of the Community.

In Person	Face-to-face meetings	
	Not In Person	E-mail
Teleconferences		
Listservs		
Web conferences		
Message boards		
	Wikis	
	Blogs	
	Podcasts	
	Real Time	Not In Real Time

Select Collaboration Resources

Members of your CoP will likely span many organizations and geographic locations, and therefore it is imperative to have several tools in place enabling communication. Your Community of Practice will need to identify the tools that will best serve your group’s communication and collaboration needs. While PHIN is currently evaluating collaboration tool options and will share further information as it becomes available, it is critical to offer tools at the time of your CoP’s launch. To help you choose the tools that are right for your community, a feature comparison may be used (see the [“Technology Tool Comparison”](#)). You may wish to poll your members to identify any tools already in existence as it may be possible to borrow existing resources without incurring additional costs.

When considering collaboration resources, there are two factors that should be considered: geography and

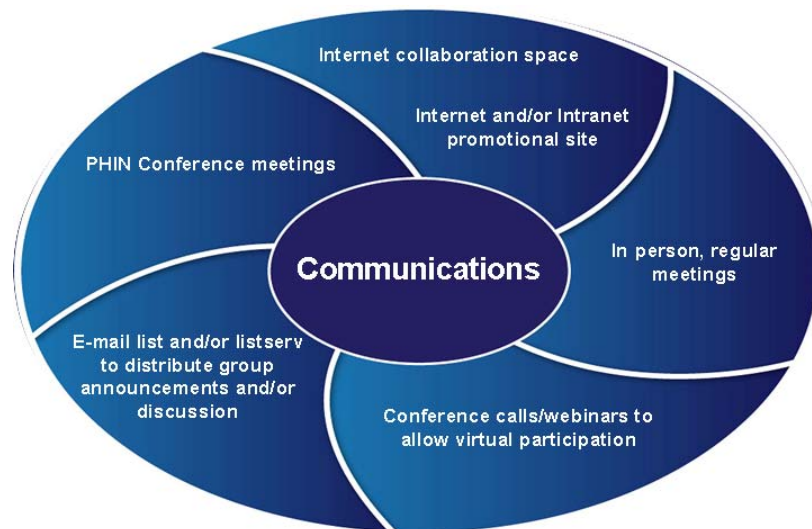
timeliness. The image to the left, adapted from *Leveraging Communities of Practice for Strategic Advantage* (p. 89), shows several communication tools available depending on the location of the participants and how fast a response is expected.⁶

The easiest type of communication is an in-person meeting. These take place face-to-face and participants have the opportunity to respond immediately. Unfortunately, with geographically dispersed communities, these meetings are expensive and difficult to schedule. While it is great to host these meetings for all members once or twice each year, a lack of resources may make it difficult to hold these in-person meetings on a more regular basis.

Another common communication vehicle takes place while people are geographically dispersed, yet connected at the same time. Examples of this include web conferences, teleconferences, instant messaging, and chat rooms. These interactions are scheduled for a specific day and time or are initiated by someone who can expect an immediate response.

These first two categories of communication are considered *synchronous* or “real-time” communication because they happen at the same time for all participants.

The final category of communication includes types of interaction during which someone can respond to a presentation, question, or statement at their leisure. This type of communication is considered *asynchronous* or not happening at the same time. E-mail, listservs, message boards, wikis, blogs, podcasts, and many types of social networking tools are based on this asynchronous concept. An author can post a blog today, and in 3 weeks, someone else can read that post and respond via comment or e-mail. These interactions do not happen at scheduled times—they depend on users to seek them out and respond if and when they choose.



All types of communication are important for encouraging collaboration within a CoP. For an explanation on how communication mediums impact community relationships, please refer to the Section, [Balance Events in Public and Private Spaces](#).

While a real time meeting or teleconference will allow your group to discuss relevant topics, it may not be possible for all members to attend at the same time. By using multiple tools, it is possible to include all members via several mediums. For instance, storing meeting minutes in a repository or posting follow-up questions on a message board can yield valuable input from members that missed an event or have something additional to add to the discussion.

CoPC Support

As a PHIN CoP, your community has the benefit of becoming part of the Communities of Practice Council (CoPC). All PHIN CoPs have representatives that serve together as the governing body for the network of the PHIN Communities of Practice. To learn more about the support provided by CoPC, see the [Overview of PHIN Communities of Practice](#).

Resources

This CoP Resource Kit has been developed by the PHIN CoPP and will be enhanced and expanded with PHIN Communities of Practice growth. Templates and guides are available at the end of each major Resource Kit section for use by all PHIN CoPs. If you have suggestions for additional resources that may be useful to your CoP and others, please provide those suggestions to via the online form.

The following table provides an overview of Resource, located in the [Resources Section](#) that may be helpful as you learn more about CoPs.

Related Resource	Description	Audience
You Might Be A CoP If...	If you're part of a group but are not sure if it is functioning as a Community of Practice, this quiz may help you decide.	Members of existing groups who might want to explore the possibility of the group becoming a Community of Practice (CoP) for the Public Health Information Network (PHIN).
In What Phase is my CoP?	The Community of Practice Resource Kit is for use by brand new CoPs as well as those who have several years of experience. This quiz will help you decide which sections of the Kit are most useful to your group. This quiz may also assist you in determining at which stage in the CoP lifecycle your community operates.	Leaders of existing PHIN Communities of Practice (CoPs)
Could it be a CoP?	Have an idea for a new CoP? These questions will help you vet the idea with your peers and make sure you're on the right track.	Individuals that would like to start a new PHIN Community of Practice (CoP)
CoP Charter Template CoP Charter Overview	CoP charters, developed by each CoP, include mission, scope, objectives, and other course-setting components needed by the group. This template gives you some ideas for the type of information you might want to include in yours – with the expectation that the needs of your CoP, and therefore the charter, may change over time.	Leaders of new and existing PHIN Communities of Practice (CoPs)
Community Expectations	It's important to provide guidelines to your members to ensure that they follow expectations that allow your CoP to thrive. This resource provides examples of general guidelines for participating in a CoP and specific guidelines for participating in a CoP meeting.	Leaders of new and existing PHIN Communities of Practice (CoPs)
Request For an Executive Sponsor Request Brief	As a new CoP it is important to retain a sponsor who can legitimize and support the community. This Template provides a mechanism for demonstrating the value of sponsoring a community of practice. Microsoft PowerPoint – includes in-depth background slides Microsoft Word Brief– includes a brief overview of CoPs	Leaders of new and existing PHIN Communities of Practice (CoPs) that are in need of an executive sponsor
Facilitation Tip Sheet	The facilitator is responsible for managing meetings, keeping conversations on track, and ensuring each member's voice is heard. This tip sheet gives some tips for how to accomplish these tasks. You can also reference the "Advanced Facilitation Guide" for an advanced guide to facilitation (suggested for experienced facilitators).	Leaders and members acting as PHIN Community of Practice (CoP) Facilitators

Related Resource	Description	Audience
Advanced Facilitation Guide	The facilitator is responsible for managing meetings, keeping conversations on track, and ensuring each member's voice is heard. This guide covers both basic and advanced tips for how to accomplish these tasks. You can also reference the Facilitation Tip Sheet for only the basic guidelines for facilitation (suggested for new or interim facilitators).	Leaders and members acting as PHIN Community of Practice (CoP) Facilitators
SME Tip Sheet	As a SME for your community, your responsibilities include inviting experts to speak to your CoP, bringing in new ideas, identifying topics for meeting agendas, and maintaining the CoP focus. This tip sheet gives some ideas for how to get all of this done.	Leaders and members acting as PHIN Community of Practice (CoP) Subject Matter Experts
Technical Management Tip Sheet Technology Tool Comparison	You're technically savvy, but for your CoP you also need to help identify the right tools for your group, define account permissions and roles, and help develop collaboration rules to ensure everyone acts respectfully. Read this Tip Sheet for some ideas on how this can work within your CoP.	Leaders and members acting as PHIN Community of Practice (CoP) Technical Managers

Launch a Community of Practice

Build Membership

Once CoP leaders and an initial set of documents defining the interest and mission of your community have been determined, it is time to begin the search for CoP members. It is imperative to start the process of solidly connecting members and to foster relationship building during the kickoff of your CoP while creating the energy needed for the community to successfully launch. Community leaders must share their knowledge and vision for the community with potential members. Leaders will need to invest time, networking skills, and technical knowledge to launch the Community of Practice.¹ The value of using social and business networks for recruiting members cannot be underestimated; leaders should remember to ask new members to help recruitment efforts by contacting potential members within their own networks. Establishing membership criteria may help community leadership ascertain a general profile of the membership base.¹² It may also be helpful to develop a process for prospective member identification as well as an invitation based upon the Resources below (all are located in the [Resources Section](#)).

- CoP Formation Announcement Template
- Invitation Approach with Script
- Meeting E-Mail Invitation Template
- Membership Tracking Template

Whatever the resources you choose to utilize, you should emphasize the benefits and value of participating in a CoP.

Interview Potential Members

A useful approach in recruiting members to participate in your Community of Practice is to “interview” them. This process is not one that is used to screen out potential members, but an opportunity to discuss the community’s potential value to the individuals and to their organizations. The interview approach is a first discussion aimed at digging deeper into the potential member’s areas of interest and what he or she feels should be the priorities for the CoP. Additionally, an interview is an excellent way to identify and recruit future leaders as it may unveil skills you may not have otherwise recognized. Interviews are important in relationship building and may foster one-on-one bonds between members creating trust--a critical precursor to knowledge sharing and collaboration.¹ The [“Invitation Approach”](#) document located in the Resources Section may generate additional ideas around this topic.

Invite Experts

While the desire to participate and contribute peer-to-peer is sufficient motivation for some members, involving key thought leaders and Subject Matter Experts in the CoP will lend value to your CoP and encourage participation of new membership.¹ Some members of a CoP will participate simply because they want to hear its primary thought leaders speak, or they are intrigued by the prospect of interacting and associating with experts on a collegial level. Of course, thought leaders and Subject Matter Experts who move from occasional presenters to fully engaged community members will contribute greatly to the practice of your community. When convinced of your CoP’s ability to contribute to the community, these experts can serve as community champions in circles outside the PHIN Community.

Just Remember....

Experts Do Matter! Seeking out thought leaders and soliciting their opinions on “how to” go about the task at hand is another way to attract their membership. If there is a shortage of such experts among the membership, then invite subject matter experts to come and speak/participate on a transitory basis.

“Knowledge is powerful when it is used. There are many knowledgeable people that don’t do anything with their knowledge. There are other knowledgeable people that know a lot about a variety of things and they have the creative ability to link random thoughts together to develop powerful ideas and solutions.”²⁴

The Kickoff Meeting

When community members and a focused area of interest have been identified, it is now time to hold a meeting. The kickoff meeting should be the start of regularly scheduled meetings, which help to anchor the community. To create a sense of community and familiarity it is helpful to have the group meet in the same space for each meeting—both in person and electronically.

If you are not hosting a face-to-face meeting, or if others might participate remotely, be sure to coordinate technology needs and user access well in advance.

Agenda items for your first meeting might include:

- Charter/mission review
- Leadership selection
- Goal prioritization
- Determine objectives
- Ensure all members are “on the same page”

The kickoff meeting should be used to solidify the direction of the group. Your CoP membership will be comprised of diverse colleagues and peers with a desire to work more effectively, solve problems, invent solutions, and learn. It will be important to review the high-level goals and objectives of the CoP at the kickoff meeting.

During subsequent meetings, your CoP can begin to explore the issues of the domain. In order to kick off these conversations, you may find it helpful to do one or more of the following

- Present your work in the CoP or ask one of your initial members to share some challenges in a domain area, with time for Q&A;
- Distribute discussion material such as related articles or papers in advance;
- Identify a particular community-related topic / issue and ask members to come prepared to discuss;
- Send questions pertaining to the topic to attendees in advance; and,
- Base discussion around goals outlined in your charter.

Your facilitator plays a vital support role for your kickoff and subsequent meetings. Ensure that you have engaged a facilitator who can adequately encourage productive inquiry, manage tension, and work toward the development of a solution.^{1,6} See the [“Facilitation Tip Sheet”](#) in the Resources Section for more information.

Self Promotion

Once established, the community will want to share initial work and plans with others. CoPs may want to:

- Present challenges and accomplishments at the PHIN CoPC meetings;
- Create a CoP-focused newsletter for your CoP and share broadly (see [“Newsletter Template”](#) in the Resources Section);
- Develop a white paper or “issue brief” on a challenge and potential solution;
- Submit abstracts to conferences;
- Send articles to professional journals detailing the work of the community;
- Highlight activities and accomplishments via articles in journals and newsletters managed by national organizations and other public health partners; and,
- Post articles about your accomplishments on your organization’s intranet or website.

The following table provides an overview of Resource, located in the [Resources Section](#) that may be helpful as you learn more about CoPs.

Related Resource	Description	Audience
Formation Announcement Template	Your CoP has formed and now it's time to spread the word. This template offers some boilerplate text for your use.	Leaders of new PHIN Communities of Practice (CoPs)
Invitation Approach	After identifying people who might be interested in joining your CoP, you may want to reach out to them personally. This template offers dialogue and text ideas to get you started.	Leaders of new and existing PHIN Communities of Practice (CoPs)
E-mail Invitations	If you'd like to reach out to potential members by sending them an email invitation to join your CoP, this template offers some general text as a starting point.	Leaders of new and existing PHIN Communities of Practice (CoPs)
Membership Tracking Template	You'll want to track both the people you've invited to join your CoP as well as those who have joined. This template makes it easy to log all that information in one central location.	Leaders of new and existing PHIN Communities of Practice (CoPs)
Newsletter Template	As your CoP begins maturing, you may want to develop a CoP newsletter for your domain. This template, in Microsoft Word, gives you a great start.	Leaders of new and existing PHIN Communities of Practice (CoPs)

Sustain and Evolve

Encourage Ongoing Participation

In the Sustain and Evolve phase of CoP development it is important to consider strategies for maintaining and increasing membership, as well as achieving the goals of the Community. Unlike a work group or team, your members participate voluntarily; they have a passion for the subject matter and are interested in increasing their own understanding of the domain and contributing to innovation in the field.⁷ You have the advantage of engaging active, enthusiastic members who are willing to seek and share knowledge as well as build trusting relationships with other people.

The challenge you face is to help members recognize their commitment to the domain and provide the infrastructure for members to share capabilities and build knowledge in a safe and rewarding forum.⁹ To accomplish this task, you need to

- Provide new and seasoned members an easy means of participation;
- Ensure that the value of membership is clearly articulated; and,
- Create abundant opportunities for members to become engaged in the community.

Make it Easy!

You have already identified passionate people who will voluntarily focus on building knowledge within your domain. It will be equally important to tend to ongoing membership needs. As a leader, you may help community members relate their participation in the CoP to professional and personal work goals. By defining a domain focus that has practical utility for individuals and organizations, you create a tangible, explicit value for potential members.¹⁰

Members may need to obtain permission or organizational support to participate in your Community of Practice. Benefits of CoPs to members, organizations, and the public health community are outlined in the [Introduction to Communities of Practice](#) section. While CoPs provide tremendous value through sharing experiences, promoting best and emerging practices, and providing a forum in which issues and problems can be raised and resolved.¹⁸ It may be important to help members make a case to their managers to demonstrate that an *individual* who participates also has the potential to devise better solutions and make better decisions by

- Developing an enhanced professional identity;
- Networking with peers and increasing his/her visibility among those peers;
- Gaining access to Subject Matter Experts who may be able to help focus and articulate developing ideas; and,
- Participating in learning and development events and activities.

Organizations also benefit when their representatives participate in a CoP. When an organization allows its personnel to join, it is potentially increasing

- Employee efficiency, in terms of time and cost, in retrieving information and a reduced learning curve;
- Industry benchmarking capacity;
- Involvement in key industry and national initiatives; and,
- Organizational reputation as a contributor in building new capabilities.

Just Remember....

Membership is Voluntary.

People will participate in a community of practice because they want to, not because they are made to. By seeking out passionate voluntary members, you'll ensure that you have enthusiastic participants who willingly seek and share information, which will produce greater results than if members had simply been assigned another task.

"If participation is compulsory, it may become perfunctory."⁴

Just Remember....

Make it Matter - Create Value for Potential Members. New and potential members need to be excited about the domain-focus of the Community of Practice, but they also need to know that they will get a return on their investment. Work with potential members to help them determine not only what they can contribute, but also what they can expect in return.

"Value is the key to community vitality. When members are clear about the value for themselves and others, they often become more active and committed." ²³

While there are numerous benefits to be gained in CoP participation, it is not always easy for members to communicate these benefits to others. The ["Case for Participation Reflection Guide,"](#) ["Case for Participation Brief,"](#) and ["Case for Participation Presentation,"](#) located in the Resources Section, are designed to allow potential members (individual or organizational) to identify mutual or shared goals with a domain CoP and the logistical practicality of participation. These resources also allow potential members to plot out an information-sharing plan.

In a distributed community where members come from diverse locations, agencies, and jurisdictions, the need to demonstrate the value of Community participation will be even greater.¹ Leaders and managers may not be directly involved in functional work performed by various employees and will most likely be concerned with ensuring the employees' work contributes to the organization's goals. However, if you can help potential members demonstrate how CoP activities relate to organizational goals, members

are more likely to successfully develop a case for participation. For example, consider Stanley, a potential member who is an epidemiologist with a county health department. Stanley has a professional interest in electronic messaging standards and would like to participate in the PHIN Public Health Vocabulary and Messaging CoP, but his supervisor is not "sold" on the idea. After all, won't this just be another series of meetings that puts more on Stanley's already full plate? Stanley can show his supervisor that participating in a community that develops HL7 standard messages for case reporting will contribute to the health department's mission by getting and keeping him up to speed on the vocabulary and messaging standards that will enable less ambiguity in data transmission and more efficient analysis. Stanley can develop his case by using the ["Case for Participation Reflection Guide,"](#) located in the Resources Section, then use a presentation template ([PowerPoint Template,](#) [Brief Template](#)) to present the information to his manager.

When members are provided a resource that connects the interests of the community to individual, organizational, and public health priorities, they are able to highlight common interests and reconcile disparities that may exist.⁴ By translating and connecting personal / professional strategic imperatives with the focus of the CoP, you provide the domain CoP a legitimacy that can be a foundation for building confidence and trust.⁹

Provide Additional Motivations and Graduated Opportunities

CoP leadership responsibilities are described in [How to identify leaders in your CoP](#). However, leadership in a Community of Practice can evolve when members play various roles at different times. It is important for community growth that multiple individuals play several roles as the community coalesces and matures. Ask new members to take leadership in one or more of these roles to strengthen the core of the CoP and ensure proper development. Identify additional volunteer opportunities in order to broaden the scope and depth of membership.

Develop Leadership—Share the Work

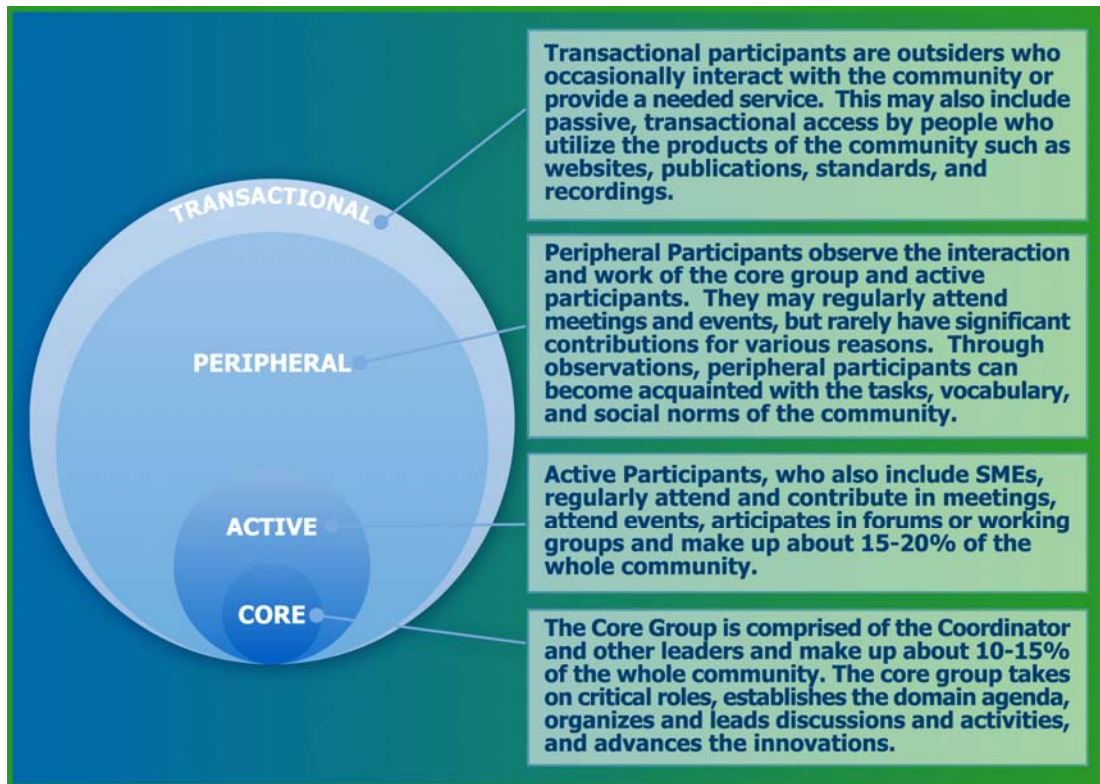
As your community continues to coalesce, leaders and active core members will need to determine the length of time members will serve in a role as well as the process for alternating roles. Once determined, the roles and responsibilities procedure should be formalized and added to the charter.

The topic [How to identify leaders in your CoP](#), reviews a list of community leadership responsibilities around facilitation, knowledge management, and additional areas. These responsibilities can be translated into specific roles or positions core members may want to assume in the community. In addition to the Community Leader, Community Sponsor, and Communities of Practice Council (CoPC) Representative there are six specific roles that your community may want to fill. One member can hold several roles, as is common in the early stages of a CoP's formation. And each role can be held by multiple CoP members, which may be needed as the community grows and is engaged in many activities. The following explains some common attributes of the people who best fit into these roles.

- **Knowledge Manager: Organizes a community's knowledge**—Sometimes known as Librarians, Knowledge Managers are detail-oriented, well organized, enjoy structuring content from disparate sources, and understand the technology resources employed by the Community. The person(s) in this role will work closely with Technical Specialists.
- **Facilitator: Handles the event management of the Community**—Manages meetings by ensuring that meeting agendas are followed, conversations stay on domain-related topics, and each member's voice is heard. For additional information and tips regarding facilitation, please refer to the ["Facilitation Tip Sheet"](#), located in the Resources Section.
- **People Connector: Assists community interaction**—also known as the community greeter, assists new members in connecting with current members and works to ensure new members feel comfortable expressing concerns and voicing suggestions.
- **Subject Matter Expert: Drives innovation as domain thought leader**—Known as the expert in the domain area and generally has many years of experience in the field, frequently publishes papers, speaks at conferences, and may teach related courses. For additional information, please refer to the ["SME Tip Sheet"](#), located in the Resources Section.
- **Technical Specialist: Manages the technology requirements and corresponding community tool**—Understands the technology used by the Community, assists in managing tools, training users as needed, and ensures the community adheres to the rules. For additional information, please refer to the ["Technical Management Tip Sheet"](#). Both resources are located in the Resources Section.
- **Communication Specialist: Manages the internal and external communication**—Skilled in written and oral communications, attention to detail, creative, and consistent.

Recognize All Levels of Participation

Ideal community design takes into account the participation needed beyond leadership. Your community will have a core group of members, in addition to its leaders, who are actively engaged in most of the work of the community. You should also assume that many of your community members will be peripheral members and will not actively participate in much of the exchange that occurs. You might be prone to insist that everyone "actively" participate, but keep in mind that peripheral participants "are an essential dimension of communities of practice."¹¹ The figure below outlines the types of members you might see in your CoP.



Wenger, E. (2000). "Communities of Practice: Stewarding Knowledge." In C. Despres (Ed.) *Knowledge Horizons: the Present and the Promise of Knowledge*. Woburn, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann Ltd.

Even though member participation may wax and wane, you allow everyone to be recognized as full members by ensuring your CoP protects the opportunity for various levels of engagement. Fluid boundaries can also create opportunities for individuals to fulfill the right roles at the right time.¹⁰

Just Remember....

Choosing the right tools makes all the difference. The methodology, technology, and tools you choose to host events and store your community's knowledge should be appropriate for your membership. Whatever you choose, ensure that your membership is already familiar and comfortable with the medium or ready to learn. Members should not have to grapple with unfamiliar technology to participate effectively.

*"When communities determine what they need to share and what forum will best enable them to share it, they can more readily own both the knowledge and forums for sharing it."*¹³

Help Build Relationships

One of the most critical functions of CoP leadership is to enhance the connections, reciprocity, and trustworthiness between community members. This task is often performed by the People Connector who works to obtain a deeper knowledge of members and develop sensitivity to group dynamics that can hasten or hinder community building.⁵ A People Connector should look for opportunities to link members to one another, make introductions and broker relationships.¹

Distributed Communities

Members located in different geographic locations, organizations, and jurisdictions present a special challenge for CoP leaders. While convening a CoP with a diverse makeup has a great potential for producing notable outcomes,^{20,22} particular care should be taken when developing relationships between members. When community members can not rely on regular face-to-face interaction, participation in the community takes additional, intentional member effort.¹ In light of these challenges, the roles of Sponsor, Leader, Facilitator, and People Connector are all heightened.

Sponsors facilitate relationship building in a distributed community through approving community norms that may be inconsistent with norms of the sponsoring sector, organization, or unit. For instance, if the sponsoring agency is one that traditionally promotes *competition* between divisions or units, the CoP sponsor can promote *collaboration* as an expected community norm. CoP leaders then become increasingly responsible for supporting the community's cultural norms. With representation from different geographical locations and different sectors, you can assume that members will not have shared norms and values for interaction or working.¹ As participants from the private sector may be concerned with divulging proprietary information, participants from the government sector may not be accustomed to working with senior officials on a collegial level. Additionally, participants from different regional areas may have dissimilar methods of seeking and sharing information. When developing the CoP charter, it is important to clearly state the CoP's expectations around how knowledge will be shared and goals achieved. It is equally important to consistently convey these community values through socialization efforts for new members (See "[Mentor/Protégé Agreement](#)"), and you may want to make these expectations known in public forums where members interact. Clearly establishing and stating the CoP's norms and expectations at the outset may add a sense of stability, trust, and reciprocity to the community—particularly when these norms are maintained by leaders and community members through role-modeling and correction, where needed.²¹

Balance Events in Public and Private Spaces

Because domain members will have differing levels of involvement, it's important to create a variety of forums where people can build and share knowledge. The ability to connect members through relationships will be at the heart of any community building that you do. Regular events in both the public and private space of a community are particularly essential in distributed communities. Building a visible community with rhythm and routine helps to keep members focused on the Community and allows them to develop trusting relationships through interaction and familiarity.¹

- **Public Spaces** are open or visible to all and can include forums such as a face-to-face meeting, an online discussion group, or a blog, either in real time or not in real time. Public opportunities are critical in allowing members to gather, connect, explore ideas and concepts, and collectively solve problems. Public gatherings also create a platform for learning about the community, gauging Community culture, and getting to know many of the participating members.¹ Community participation in public spaces allows members to feel as though they are part of a joint enterprise and can be crucial in reinvigorating a community on a regular basis and creating benchmarks for the community's history. Public spaces are ideal for capturing and cataloging the community's documented, codified knowledge.⁸ Through the use of public forums, members are more likely to connect in private spaces.^{1,8} While public spaces are an essential part of CoPs, private spaces should not be ignored, particularly as the community is coalescing.¹²
- **Private spaces** are one-on-one or small group interactions that can occur face to face, by phone, or electronically, either in real time or not in real time. Private spaces not only allow members to share and problem solve one-on-one, but also strengthen the relationships between members.⁸ Private or semiprivate dialogues allow members to bring up novel, peripheral, or partially formed issues and ideas they may not want to bring up in a public space. Then, the more mature, domain-specific issues can be addressed in a public space by the entire community and members will likely be able to contribute to problem solving.¹

The graphic below highlights various types of public and private spaces as well as assorted features of each.



Adapted from: Snyder, William M., de Sousa Briggs, Xavier. "Communities of Practice: A New Tool for Government Managers." IMB Center for the Business of Government. 2003.

Forum Type	Public	Private	Features
Website, wikis, RSS feeds, podcasts	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Captures information • Publishes for group to view • Easily accessible to group knowledge • Allows for passive and transitional education
Listserv, blogs, social networking bookmarks	X	X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offers efficient information sharing • Unobtrusive Q&A and peripheral learning • Can be private or public, based on user choice
Site visits		X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows members to develop personal relationships and build shared histories • Creates a foundation and context for problem solving • Provides opportunity to learn about site-specific challenges and opportunities
Face-to-face events	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitates relationships • Builds trust among members • Creates a sense of joint enterprise • Can jump start work on a special topic • Provides opportunity for "private" connection • Increases productivity in other learning venues
One on one—by phone, chat room, etc.		X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows members to develop personal relationships and build trust • Facilitates deeper problem solving • Allows ideas to be vetted by other members before presenting to the whole group
Tele/ video/ web conferences	X		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-cost option to increase interactivity and relationship building • Provides opportunity to address issues "on demand" • Reinforces cultural norms of CoP and allows members to get to know each other's "style"

Forum Type	Public	Private	Features
Projects or subgroups		X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build relationships and sense of joint enterprise • Address collective needs (e.g., developing universal applications) by tapping into individual interests or focus

As a CoP leader, you are the gatekeeper of the interface between private and public interchanges. By thoughtfully managing private spaces and the resulting relationship building, you will enrich events and interactions in public spaces.¹

Create a Member Directory

A member directory is a simple, straightforward mechanism that allows new members to begin participation immediately, with ease, and without risk. To create a member directory, each member must create a basic profile that includes contact information, title and role(s), and areas of interest or expertise within the domain. When members expand their profile to include more in-depth professional characteristics, interests, values, and accomplishments, members have access to more insightful information that may serve as openings for casual conversation and subsequent relationship building.⁶ Members should consider including individual photographs and links to personal or professional websites (keeping in mind that the content is for work-related use). Use the [“Biographical Sketch Template”](#), located in the Resources Section, as a template for creating a member directory. A member directory may be helpful in distributed communities where face-to-face interaction between members may be rare.

Develop a Person-to-Person Activity

A Person-to-Person activity is a unique method for welcoming new members into the community and is intended to encourage members to establish a personal and professional relationship with one another and to set the stage for future collaboration within the group. In a Person-to-Person activity, a new member is usually paired with a current, experienced member who can share his or her experiences and the benefits gained from participation in a CoP. The experienced member may introduce the new member to the Community’s social norms and help the new member become integrated into the community.

The People Connector may facilitate a Person-to-Person activity by pairing members and making introductions. Topics the paired members may discuss include their reasons for joining the CoP, current interest or work in the domain, involvement with PHIN, and anticipated and actual professional benefits of CoP membership.

Facilitate Mentor/Protégé Relationships

A mentor is generally understood to be a knowledgeable individual who volunteers his or her time to guide another’s development. A Mentor-Protégé program is meant to provide new members with

- A relational process for developing an understanding of member roles and responsibilities;
- A relationship with a seasoned member or leader who knows and understands the community’s culture and norms and how to navigate within the structure of the community; and,
- A relationship that can assist the mentor and the protégé to develop additional professional relationships within and outside the community.

The mentor helps a protégé to:

- Create a vision for what may be accomplished through the community;
- Clarify and set goals;
- Shift perspectives to new possibilities;
- Develop new action strategies;
- Remain accountable; and,

- Draw upon the mentor's existing experience and knowledge.

To facilitate a mentor/protégé program for your Community of Practice

- Develop a list of available mentors and ensure you will be able to sufficiently meet the anticipated demand;
- Create a set of loosely defined responsibilities for mentors and protégés. Allow mentors and protégés to take these suggestions and negotiate the activities and terms in ways that best work for them;
- Solicit volunteers interested in cultivating a mentor / protégé relationship;
- Pair mentors and protégés based on professional goals, experience within the community, and availability; and,
- Offer the ["Mentor-Protégé Agreement"](#) resource to pairings to assist in plan development.

The ["Mentor-Protégé Agreement"](#), located in the Resources Section, provides guidance on items the mentor and protégé may want to negotiate, such as activities and the length of the anticipated commitment. Responsibilities for both mentor and protégé may vary from one experience to the next and may change as the protégé's abilities and goals evolve. The primary purpose of a mentor/protégé program is to overcome barriers, build relationships, and create opportunities for community members. If the program becomes burdensome for either participant, adjustments may be made accordingly.

Community Evolution

As your CoP matures, it will continue to need attention as it begins to refine its focus and expand its priorities during the maturation stage. New members may quickly become active and veteran members may transition to peripheral roles or completely out of the community. While growth often leads to tremendous opportunities, it must be managed in order to translate these opportunities into innovation.¹

Several activities to prepare for during this phase include

- Involving experts in the activities of the community;
- Continuing to recruit new members while not losing focus on the goals of the community; and,
- Transitioning from sharing knowledge to developing a body of knowledge.

A maturing community may greatly benefit from the contributions of experts and efforts should be made to engage them and utilize their knowledge. Experts can become more fully engaged by being asked to respond to the following questions

- What are your thoughts on this matter?
- How would you approach this?
- Do you think this is the correct way to proceed?
- What has your past experience shown you on this topic?
- How do you think this project can proceed most effectively?

Just Remember....

Boundaries Were Meant to be Challenged. The PHIN Communities of Practice is designed to be a collection of communities that finds value in crossing and spanning boundaries. While it is important to understand where your work begins and another's ends, in connecting with community members you may find a much needed opportunity for growth and development that keeps your CoP truly cutting-edge.

"...Boundary crossing can be the source of a deep kind of learning. While the core of a practice is a locus of expertise, radically new insights and developments often arise at the boundaries between communities. Something very creative can take place in the meeting of perspectives at these boundaries when participants make a genuine effort to listen to each other or to solve a common problem."¹

You should find a balance between welcoming new members and focusing on established issues or cutting-edge topics and expert interactions. It is important to recognize that growth can multiply relationships and make the community more satisfying and robust. New members can offer new perspectives and different life and work experiences.¹

At this stage of development, you have determined your community's value and are clarifying its focus and further defining its role in the field. Be aware that boundaries may begin to shift and communities may appropriately begin to interface with other CoPs. Movement from sharing information to developing a body of knowledge will increase the number and types of demands on the members of the community.¹

In creating this body of knowledge, it is important for Community members to:

- Strive for quality at the individual level;
- Take pride in and responsibility for the work that they produce; and,
- Use defined and disciplined modifiable processes to produce high-quality work on planned schedules.

Just Remember....

Tell Your Stories. Outcome evaluation is critical in your evaluation approach as a part of documentation and demonstrating the value of your community. But don't forget the importance of anecdotal information from key informants for a real and complete sense of the total value of your community, including the role of social capital and how relationships produce results.

"Stories are the best way to traverse the knowledge system in a way that explains the linkages between community activities, knowledge resources, and performance outcomes. Only a story can describe the complex causal relations while incorporating implicit contextual factors that may be crucial to appreciate, but hard to codify or generalize." ¹

As the community evolves it is important that core members continue to monitor the progress of the CoP and not allow it to stagnate or lose sight of its purpose.

Explore Boundaries

As a means of maintaining vitality and enhancing the work of the CoP, a mature CoP may take opportunities for collaboration, which may occur among members, across organizations, or among multiple CoPs. These collaborations may be fostered by

- Asking members to share about domain-specific information from other organizations to which they belong;
- Actively participating in PHIN discussion groups to discover areas of collaboration; and,
- Attending meetings, conferences, or events with professionals interested in your CoP's focus area.

Develop a Learning Agenda

The Community of Practice leadership responsibilities include collaborating with the PHIN Community

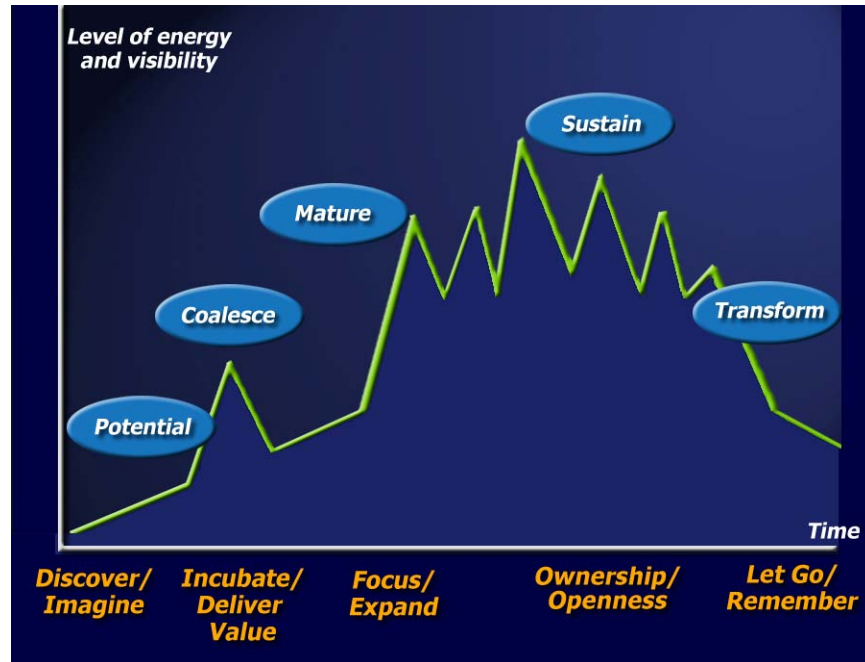
partners to develop and implement a learning agenda. Your CoP Charter, which can be used to outline this agenda, is a living document designed to guide decision making in order to promote an integrated and comprehensive learning plan for the Community. The intent of implementing a learning agenda is to enhance efforts, combine planning, and take steps to effectively and efficiently meet the needs of the community. To begin creating a learning agenda, consider the following

- Host a brainstorming session for Community members to discuss the domain-related topics they would like to learn more about;
- Assign identified topics to individuals (or small teams);
- Ask each topic owner to research and distribute information on their category; and,
- Request all members review materials prior to the next meeting.

A Time for Change

It is important to understand the communities of practice life-cycle and its five phases: Potential, Coalesce, Mature, Sustain, and Transform.

In the *Potential* phase, a problem or project is identified that would best be solved jointly by colleagues from different departments, parts of an organization, or perhaps different organizations. This is a time of imagination and discovery as the ground work is laid for formation of a new CoP. Members discover commonalities and find one another at this time.^{1,2} Once the group has formed and the kickoff meeting has occurred, the work of the community will be further refined.



During the *Coalescing* phase, new ideas incubate and the value that the CoP will offer to PHIN is further defined. This is a vital time for group members to come together for a common goal and understanding of the true nature of the work of the CoP.^{1,2}

Just Remember....

Judiciously Document. In order to create a shared history and communicate your community's collective knowledge accumulated over time, the importance of good documentation cannot be overstated. Adequate documentation is judicious and selective by nature. Develop a reasonable system to capture your community's process and products, but do not create a sea of documents through which no one can navigate.

*"The result of documentism is typically an information junkyard, stockpiled with potentially useful but inaccessible information. It is a consequence of thinking that the documents are the main source of value of the community. To remedy it, communities need to think through their purpose, identify the documents that would genuinely be useful, and develop clear roles for managing them."*¹

In the *Maturation* phase, the work of the group is undertaken in earnest, the focus of the group is further defined, and the membership is expanded to include new members with the expertise and interest to do the work of the CoP. Members engage in developing a practice and joint activities. Artifacts such as a knowledge repository made up of edited notes on community meetings, data bases, relevant articles, books, cases and other resources are created during this phase.^{1,2} Roles may change during the maturation phase as old members transition out of the community and new members join the effort. Maintaining and expanding focus are key elements of this phase.

The level of energy and the vitality of the CoP are greatest during the *Sustaining* phase. The work of the community will be well underway and set milestones will be realized. CoP members will adopt an attitude of openness toward the work of the community and assume ownership for the tasks and projects underway.

During the *Transformation* phase, the CoP experiences major shifts in its organization and focus. One CoP may break apart and reorganize. Another CoP may undergo a split or merge with another CoP. During transformation, the primary

objectives and goals that formed the CoP have been achieved and members may begin to let go and start to remember where the group has been and what has been accomplished.^{1,2} A CoP might find there are different interests represented and choose to diversify those interests into new and separate CoPs, or may choose to align with another CoP with similar interests. Occasionally, when the work of a CoP has been achieved the group is dissolved. This is a very normal part of the CoP lifecycle.

Define the Community's Role in the Organization

As your CoP matures, it will take on greater importance within PHIN and must be clear about what responsibilities it is able to assume. Realistic timelines should be developed for the work of the community and the achievement of milestones should be acknowledged and celebrated. A member of the CoP will also represent the group to the CoPC and will report on progress to that group.

CoP Working Groups

Maturing communities may find it useful to form working groups so members are able to remain connected to the CoP as a whole while doing work within a smaller group. A working group is usually organized for a special purpose, is self-managed, and may be comprised of Subject Matter Experts in a particular area. It is often through working groups that experts in a particular discipline can participate more fully.

It is important as workgroups form that they do not lose connection to the CoP. Your community's learning agenda is fluid and subject to change with members' needs. Various ways this change may be managed is through exploring new topic areas, creating guidelines, and identifying several approaches to practice.¹ As change takes place, projects will become developmental milestones to the life of the CoP.

Maintain Momentum

A significant challenge faced by evolving communities is the ability to sustain momentum. There tend to be natural shifts in the CoP's practice, members, technology, and relationship to the PHIN Community as the CoP develops. When key members are unavailable, less active members must step in and assume greater responsibility to maintain momentum. For this to occur, it may be necessary to attract new people to the core group. Over time, the community must take steps to maintain energy and may want to implement these strategies to rejuvenate the community

- Host a renewal workshop;
- Review documents and materials from the CoP's early existence;
- Target new members from groups that do not yet have strong representation; and,
- Invite guest speakers or lecturers to talk about their work or innovations in a particular field¹.

The following table provides an overview of resources that may help you with increasing and maintaining momentum within your CoP. Each Resource described is located in the [Resources Section](#).

Related Resource	Description	Audience
Case for Participation Reflection Guide	Members may need to obtain permission or organizational support to participate in a CoP. By sharing this completed document, potential members can identify mutual or shared goals with the CoP and determine how practical it is for them to participate. This customizable Template, in Microsoft Word, also allows potential members to create a plan for obtaining support from their managers and sharing information about the CoP.	Individuals who are interested in joining a PHIN Community of Practice (CoP) and want to justify and explain their involvement in the CoP to their managers and peers
The Case For Participation	This customizable Template, in Microsoft PowerPoint, allows potential members to share information about the CoP as part of their plan to obtain support from their managers.	Individuals who are interested in joining a Community of Practice

Related Resource	Description	Audience
Case for Participation Brief	Microsoft PowerPoint – includes in-depth background slides Microsoft Word Brief– includes a brief overview of CoPs	(CoP) and want to explain the concept to their peers or request permission to participate from their managers
Biographical Sketch Template	To help your CoP members get to know one another, you can ask each person to share some information about their personal and professional interests. This resource provides the framework for that sharing.	Members of PHIN Communities of Practice (CoPs) who would like to provide a brief biography of themselves to their community
Mentor-Protégé Agreement	If you set up a Mentor-Protégé program, it may be helpful to give participants some guidelines for coming up with an agreement. This resource may also be used by community members who want to enter into a mentor/protégé relationship on their own. This customizable Template can be used to ensure that participants are considering concrete action items when making their arrangement.	Members of PHIN Communities of Practice (CoPs) who are interested in forming a Mentor/Protégé relationship as either Mentor or Protégé

Access the PHIN CoPs Resource Kit [Resources](#), [Glossary](#), and [References](#) on the web.