

FINDING YOUR COMMUNITY AND CONNECTING WITH IT, PART 2

Adam Hockman

In the September 2022 installment of this column, I shared some benefits of being part of a “community of practice” (CoP)—a group of people with the same interests or passions who benefit by regularly interacting with one another. Researchers Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner coined this term and listed a variety of activities that can help realize these connections. Last time, we explored three of their suggestions: solving problems, reusing assets, and building an argument. Let’s explore four more of their ideas to further nurture your CoP.

Visits. There’s no better way to show your support for a colleague than by visiting them in person. Once you’ve connected with a few colleagues, seek out opportunities to see them in action: an upcoming concert or open rehearsal, or a drop-in visit to walk through the instrument they play (extend an invite for them to do the same by you). Visits to colleagues are meaningful because they firm up relationships and build professional memories. I’ll never forget a road trip I took with my friend Elizabeth Williams, music minister and organist for Muhlenberg Lutheran Church in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Along with her tuner, we visited little-known organ gems around the state. At each destination, Elizabeth tried out the instrument, and we walked through the organ chamber and sanctuary. This helped her consider the capabilities that would fit her church’s budget and acoustical constraints. Visits shape not only personal relationships, colleague to colleague, but also organizational ones. Many music institutions love to showcase their organs, and one way to do that is to have a credible professional stop by to play and learn about them.

Identifying gaps in competence. As your community and network grow, you’ll learn about the different experiences and perspectives your professional contacts bring to their work. You’ll also start to learn whom you can rely on for certain types of expertise. When faced with a gap in your own competence, seek mentorship or advice from those who have the necessary knowledge or skills. The Wenger-Trayners suggest asking yourself, “Who knows what, and what are we missing? What other groups should we connect with?” Learn from those who already have experience with what you need to get done.

Requests for information. Sometimes you’ll have the competence required to get a job done but still need a

piece of information—for example, insights on a product you’re thinking about buying, a conference you might attend, or the year’s liturgical recommendations. As part of a CoP, you can request information with a high probability of hearing back.

Imagine needing information to accomplish a task but having no expertise upon which you can rely. You might have to stumble through it yourself or make a cold call. In my experience, requesting information from a stranger via email doesn’t often yield a response. But when you have relationships with colleagues, your name popping up in their inbox or text messages will be more welcome, and you may receive a quick reply. By requesting information, you are displaying an openness that your community can feel comfortable reciprocating.

Coordination and synergy. In most music settings, financial resources are tight. The Wenger-Trayners recommend using your CoP to stretch a shoestring budget by exploring how to combine purchases to achieve bulk discounts.

A CoP can coordinate in other ways too, such as a shared music library where each member lends repertoire to colleagues. Each quarter, review the shared catalogs and arrange for music to be shipped to and from as requested. A lending library will expand your options when restricted funds limit purchasing power for organ, choral, or chamber scores and parts.

Continue to Build Your Community

I said it in the last article, and I’ll say it again here: start small. Find one or two colleagues and connect with them by phone or meet for coffee. Implement and practice these suggestions (plus the ones from my last piece on this). Then, see if it makes sense to enlarge your CoP. When this is done right, the rich results that emerge from your community will motivate and benefit everyone involved.

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