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# Supporting Communities of Practice

A TOPS Quick Guide to  
Linking Development Practitioners



The TOPS Program  
July 2013



# Supporting Communities of Practice:

A TOPS Quick Guide to Linking  
Development Practitioners

The Technical and Operational Performance Support (TOPS) Program is the USAID/Food for Peace-funded learning mechanism that generates, captures, disseminates, and applies the highest quality information, knowledge, and promising practices in development food assistance programming, to ensure that more communities and households benefit from the U.S. Government's investment in fighting global hunger. Through technical capacity building, a small grants program to fund research, documentation and innovation, and an in-person and online community of practice (the Food Security and Nutrition [FSN] Network), The TOPS Program empowers food security implementers and the donor community to make lasting impact for millions of the world's most vulnerable people.

Led by Save the Children, The TOPS Program draws on the expertise of its consortium partners: CORE Group (knowledge management), Food for the Hungry (social and behavioral change), Mercy Corps (agriculture and natural resource management), and TANGO International (monitoring and evaluation). Save the Children brings its experience and expertise in commodity management, gender, and nutrition and food technology, as well as the management of this 7-year (2010–2017) US\$30 million award.

**Disclaimer:**

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**Contact:**

The TOPS Program  
c/o Save the Children  
2000 L Street, NW, Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20036  
[info@thetopsprogram.org](mailto:info@thetopsprogram.org)  
[www.thetopsprogram.org](http://www.thetopsprogram.org)

# Contents

- Acknowledgements..... i
- Introduction ..... 1
- How Communities Get Started ..... 2
- Planning and Maintaining Your Community ..... 3
  - 1. Define the purpose of your community. .... 4
  - 2. Identify and reach out to potential members. .... 5
  - 3. Determine the knowledge and experience your community has and needs..... 6
  - 4. Define roles and responsibilities..... 6
  - 5. Select tools and technologies. .... 7
  - 6. Establish a rhythm of activity..... 9
  - 7. Build a sense of community..... 10
  - 8. Raise awareness of your community. .... 11
  - 9. Use data to measure success and make improvements..... 12
- Resources..... 13

## Acknowledgements

*Supporting Communities of Practice* is part of a series of quick guides produced by The Technical and Operational Performance Support (TOPS) Program to improve knowledge sharing and program learning by development practitioners. This guide represents an effort to package the learning gained by the TOPS Knowledge Management team in the process of launching and supporting the Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) Network's many cross-organizational task forces and online discussion groups. The quick guide focuses on key steps that will help foster a community of practice that is responsive to member needs, opportunities, and expertise, and activities that will foster peer learning, sharing, and positive action around common development interests and practices. The quick guide format, it is hoped, will make a number of easily adopted approaches and techniques accessible to a broad swathe of development practitioners.

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# Introduction

Communities of practice can take on many different forms. However, they share a common goal: connecting people in a particular craft and/or profession to share experiences and learn from one another. Technology has made easier connecting members of a community of practice across organizations and countries to accomplish work collaboratively, solve problems and help one another learn.

This quick guide to *Supporting Communities of Practice* gives you the tools you need to get started and host a community for peer learning, sharing and action.

Whether you plan to work in the context of face-to-face, telephone or online gatherings, this guide is meant to provide ideas and promising practices for planning, supporting and seeing successful outputs from the community you and your peers have in mind.

Keep in mind that communities evolve over time. Your community will have different needs in the future. Be prepared to be flexible and modify your strategies as the needs of the community change.

“[Communities of Practice are] groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in the area by interacting on an ongoing basis.”

–Etienne Wenger

Note: For the purposes of this document the words community/group/community of practice and the words facilitator/moderator will be used interchangeably, respectively.

## How Communities Get Started

While communities vary and no two are exactly alike, there are some fundamental reasons a community may want to join together. Seeking to understand and address these motivations will help your community achieve success. Here are some of the more common reasons, though there are many more.

### **Learning from one another**

Some groups serve as peer resource communities over a common practice or emerging area of work. If a member needs information or is seeking expertise, the group can provide feedback. Individuals act as resources for one another within these groups.

### **Maintaining connections**

At a workshop, meeting or other venue, participants may have had a good discussion or learned that they share some common goals or interests with one another. Forming an ongoing community will allow them to continue a discussion, share resources or otherwise stay connected, even when they are not able to physically meet.

### **Working toward a specific goal**

A group might form around a specific project, task or deadline that they would like to collaborate on together. Fostering a community identity around this specific goal can facilitate building relationships, identifying member skill-sets and experience, and setting clearer goals and task assignments. These are all important ingredients for successful collaboration.

# Planning and Maintaining Your Community

Once you and your peers decide that starting a community could help meet shared goals, you must plan for it. The following steps include questions that will help you determine the context of your community and important aspects to consider. Use them as a planning guide. Doing so will help keep the group focused and measure success. This quick guide discusses how to put each of these steps into action.

## **1. Define the purpose of your community.**

Why is this community coming together? Is the reason, for example, to share ideas and expertise in an emerging technical area, to collaborate and problem solve, or to improve strategies, processes or planning? Are there particular intervention areas, strategies or regions of interest? Make sure that your purpose is clear, specific and relevant to those you are working with and others you intend to reach out to.

## **2. Identify and reach out to potential members.**

Are there key stakeholders already advocating for the formation of such a group or other practitioners or influencers who would fit naturally into the community? Who else will you invite to join the group? How will you reach out to them? If you are forming a new community, invite these people to be co-founders.

## **3. Determine the knowledge and experience your community has and needs.**

What expertise does each member of your community have? What knowledge do members want to gain through their participation? Get to know your members, specifically their assets and expectations, so that together you can create learning opportunities that draw upon the knowledge and experience of members and satisfy their needs.

## **4. Define roles and responsibilities.**

Who will drive conversations within the community? Communities vary depending on the level of structure and types of roles they require. The more structured a group—for example, having defined tasks and deliverables—the more concrete the roles will need to be. You should decide with your group which roles need to be filled in order for you to achieve your goals.

## **5. Select tools and technologies.**

Which technology platforms and online tools will help you carry out your group activities? In low-resource environments, or where distance does not play an issue, face-to-face meetings may be sufficient. But in other cases, think through the particular combination of technologies that suits the needs of your community.

## **6. Establish a rhythm of activity.**

Which events and processes can you implement to give the community a sense of life and vibrancy? Establishing rituals, such as recurring discussion events, dialogues with experts and periodic meetings, is an important step in creating momentum and laying the foundation for a

strong online community. Develop a plan and schedule of events to keep members engaged and make your group more productive.

## **7. Build a sense of community.**

What are you doing to strengthen bonds between members? A sense of community will encourage members to invest in the group. It is important to have strategies that will help foster this, particularly when linking practitioners across distances.

## **8. Raise awareness of your community.**

How are you reaching out to new audiences? Adding new members can be a good way to strengthen your community. Think through how to attract people that work in similar practice areas as the rest of the group and that will be active participants. However, as you grow, remember the importance of maintaining a specific area of focus of relevance to your core members.

## **9. Use data to measure success and make improvements.**

How will you define success for your community? Set goals and regularly monitor your progress to see how you are doing. Also use data to determine how you can improve member experience.

# **1. Define the purpose of your community.**

Before you go through the work of starting an online community, take some time to think about what you, your peers and potential community members want to achieve. What needs will this community satisfy for participants? How would this community be different from existing communities, education opportunities or resources?

Talk to prospective members and ask them whether the proposed subject matter and goals of the community reflect their needs and interests. Search the web to determine if other online communities already exist in these areas and for these audiences. Research existing communities, then define how this community will be different. Once you have identified the purpose of your community, organize your group in a way that will best facilitate its success. Some examples of group organization types are provided below.

### **Information exchange or interest group**

This type of community is dedicated to information exchange around a particular topic or technical area. People may share promising practices, have discussions, ask questions, and share articles, relevant publications and other news around this topic.

### **Action learning group**

This type of group forms because a problem needs to be solved, but the ultimate goal of the group is peer-to-peer learning. Practitioners share experiences on how they have tackled similar problems in the past and fresh perspectives on how the problem can be examined and resolved. It is important to document and share learning as it happens through collecting promising practices, or developing peer-to-peer “how-to” guides, technical notes or case studies. This type

of group tends to work best with at most ten people. Findings should be shared with other practitioners outside of the group.

### **Deliverable-focused group**

A group may be formed to accomplish a specific task, such as developing a tool, creating guidelines or planning a workshop. Such a group needs structured leadership and should follow a work plan. In some cases you may want to consider seeking a funding source to help accomplish your goals. This type of group may or may not disband once the deliverable is complete.

### **Working group**

Practitioners with similar skills seek to accomplish a series of tasks over an extended period. Strong leadership is important in this type of group to accomplish goals efficiently and keep momentum going over a longer timeframe and multiple activities. Therefore, think about the leadership roles your group will require. Creating a work plan to guide group activities is a very important initial step.

### **Staying on task and on track**

For more structured groups, especially in cases where you are working toward a set deliverable or set of tasks, developing a work plan will help keep your group on target. For a greater chance of success, plan a few meaningful tasks that you hope to accomplish over the course of a year, rather than an unrealistic long list of activities.

A few principles to keep in mind:

- Define specific outputs.
- Select activities that complement group participants' work in-progress or donor agendas.
- Consider a realistic timeline for the tasks you plan to complete.
- Think through the resources that will be needed to carry out the work, in terms of time, money, logistics and expertise.
- Identify individuals who will play key roles, and make sure you have their commitment.

## **2. Identify and reach out to potential members.**

Now that you and your peers have painted a clearer picture of the community's purpose, take some time to think about who else would benefit the community and/or would benefit from participation. You already may have an existing group of interested colleagues, or you are building on an area of emerging interest or an occasion that brought individuals with common interests together.

Make a list of those who already have helped you plan, as well as those who have expressed interest in the community. Be sure to take into account the various types of organizations and institutions, the technical and cross-cutting issues, and the staff roles that are most relevant. If a particular organization's or institution's expertise would benefit the group, do some research or speak with members of your network to identify a specific representative that you could invite to join.

Once you have a list of potential participants, reach out to them one by one. Send individual emails and make phone calls.

If you are inviting new contacts to join an existing group, begin by getting to know them, their background and their interest in your community's topic area. Then, invite them to become members of the community, highlighting the specific strengths and contributions you believe they could bring to the group.

If you are forming a new group, reach out to the individuals on your list to share your ideas for the community of practice. After getting to know them and their level of interest in your topic area, invite them individually to join your community as founding members. Engage them in meaningful conversations about what their aspirations are for such a community. Develop a strong starting group and get them talking to one another to build momentum in the community.

### 3. Determine the knowledge and experience your community has and needs.

The knowledge base needed for a thriving community likely already exists in the expertise and experience of your group members, or in the experience of someone a group member is connected to. Set up one-on-one discussions with group members so you can ask them about their areas of expertise, skill sets, needs and interests. You can also send surveys created in SurveyMonkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)), Google Forms (<http://www.google.com/drive/apps.html>) or another tool to gather this data from members. Maintain a spreadsheet tracking the responses of each member. As members share their expertise and reveal their needs in group discussions and during other activities, add new information to this spreadsheet.

Draw on this information regularly by inviting specific group members to lead and contribute to discussions when their particular knowledge and experience can add value. You might consider sharing a simple contact list with members that highlights their skills and connections. Also encourage members to share this information with one another through their online profiles. This is a simple way to increase community members' access to the information and knowledge they are seeking.

### 4. Define roles and responsibilities.

All groups require some level of leadership, though the level of structure will vary. Whether online or offline, the community of practice will need strong moderation and facilitation to be successful. Three roles, in particular, are essential for a healthy online community.

#### **Community manager**

The community manager must be able to provide dedicated time to manage the activities of the online community and drive membership. All communities need a community manager, though it can be a role shared by more than one individual.

#### **Insiders**

These community members help drive the group forward, setting priorities, identifying needs and interests, creating content, leading discussions, and otherwise providing forward momentum and focus.

#### **Active members**

These are the heart of any group: community members that attend meetings, engage in discussions, help carry out activities, and share their learning and expertise with one another.

Each of these roles is important, but whether taken on by one individual or several, the community manager role is essential. Below are some key responsibilities that an online community manager fills and that insiders and active members of your community might be able to help with. Based on your group's goals, decide which additional responsibilities need to be accounted for. Depending on your group, you may want one person to be assigned several responsibilities or one responsibility to be shared among several people. You may want to take turns filling various roles so the responsibility shifts. Define the key roles and responsibilities and who will fill them in your community's work plan.

### **Relationships**

Build and maintain relationships with and between community members. Form a group of insiders that will promote participation and dialogue within the community. Address any problems or disputes that arise within the community, and work to remove barriers to participation.

### **Moderation**

Hold and lead meetings, activities, events and discussions. Identify opportunities for collaboration and peer learning, encouraging members to lead and contribute to discussions, tasks and other activities where peer knowledge will be shared.

### **Goal setting and achievement**

Maintain focus for the group. Ensure that activities stay on track and that objectives are clear. Oversee workplanning, and track progress toward strategic goals. Plan and facilitate ongoing activities and special events aligned with overall community objectives.

### **Growth**

Invite people to join the community by encouraging community members to invite peers and colleagues, and by promoting the community on listservs, through social media and at conferences or meetings. Aim to increase the number of insiders and active members in your community as much as necessary or possible.

## **5. Select tools and technologies.**

Now that you have reflected on the activities that your community could use to share their knowledge and experience, the next step is to decide how your group will come together. Will you plan to meet exclusively in-person, by telephone or online or use some combination? What meeting space is available for in-person meetings? What technologies can you use for virtual meetings or communications? Be flexible, but discuss what will work for your group and will help you to accomplish your goals.

The **FSN Network Portal** (<http://www.fsnnetwork.org>) is an online platform used to host groups. In addition to discussion forums that focus on technical areas related to food security and nutrition, the portal provides collaborative spaces where online communities can exchange information, share documents and establish dialogue.

Other popular tools are listed below. Depending on the needs of the group, you may choose to use one of these tools or a combination of them to stay connected.

### **Ning (<http://www.ning.com/>)**

This is one of the most popular platforms for building your own online community space. Monthly fees apply.

### **Groupsite (<http://www.groupsite.com/>)**

This Ning competitor allows you the opportunity to develop a branded online community with a file-sharing option. Monthly fees apply.

### **Fuze Meeting (<http://www.fuzemeeting.com>)**

This web-based meeting tool includes voice and video features. It also has functions to share documents, web pages and a virtual white board.

### **Adobe Connect (<http://www.adobe.com/products/adobeconnect.html>)**

This is another web-based meeting tool that is more sophisticated but more expensive than Fuze.

### **Skype (<http://www.skype.com>)**

This free voice-over-the-internet service allows members to communicate with peers by voice, video and instant messaging. For a fee, users also can call cellular phones and land lines.

### **Google Hangouts (<http://www.google.com/+learnmore/hangouts/>)**

This web-based video conferencing tool allows up to ten people to video-chat face-to-face and share screens. You must have a Google Plus account to use this tool.

### **Google Groups (<https://groups.google.com>)**

This tool will allow you to store email contacts for your group, have email-based discussions and send messages to the entire group (similar to a listserv). Documents may also be shared by emailing them through the group.

### **Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>)**

Facebook allows you to create groups that either are by invitation only or open to the general public. This can be a useful tool for you to share and store your group members' contact information and post relevant information, but will not allow for in-depth dialogue and exchange as other web-based or email platforms.

### **LinkedIn (<http://www.linkedin.com>)**

LinkedIn is a business-related social networking site with a similar platform to Facebook. You can create a space for your group within LinkedIn to keep in touch with your group and share information.

## 6. Establish a rhythm of activity.

With a better understanding of community members' needs and interests, piece together events and activities that provide opportunities to share experiences and learn from one another. Aim to establish some rituals. In addition to simple work sessions or topical discussions, the following recurring events are examples of activities that invite participation and create a sense of expectation from members. These activities could occur quarterly, monthly, weekly or more frequently, depending on your group's needs. You can choose the same activity regularly or mix it up a bit to give the group some variety. Use the following list to help you think through possible activities for your group.

### Presenter-led discussion

Use the information you collected about members' assets and needs to select a topic that they would like to explore more deeply. Invite another member or an outside expert with relevant experience to share their story with the online community on this topic through a face-to-face meeting, webinar or call. If possible, get a community member who expressed interest in learning more about this topic to moderate the discussion.

Schedule and promote the discussion a few weeks in advance, if possible. Leave as much time as possible for participants to ask as many questions of the presenter as possible during the presentation and build in specific time for group discussion to encourage peer-to-peer exchange.

### Ask an expert

This is similar to a presenter-led discussion, but focuses entirely on a question-and-answer exchange and may be conducted entirely online or via email. An expert in a certain topic area can answer questions over a set period of time. Promote the exchange at least a couple weeks before the discussion is set to begin. Invite a few key members to post questions first to get the conversation going. Periodically update the group on the status of the conversation and invite members to post.

### Peer assist

These "ask and answer" sessions allow one community member to explain to the group a specific technical or implementation challenge they are facing. Other participants provide thoughts, recommendations and advice. Peer assists, which also can be conducted in-person or entirely online, allow community members to tap the collective expertise of the group.

### Encouraging Sharing and Learning

There are many small, manageable activities you can build on to encourage participation and informal sharing and learning between group members. For example, encourage members to:

- Share feedback about interesting events or trainings, or about new tools and resources they have encountered
- Brief one another on new activities in their shared field of interest
- Inform one another of new evaluation or research findings, or of a key learning point in their own work
- Brainstorm favorite tools, guides or approaches
- Plan a joint presentation or other outreach beyond the community to raise awareness or understanding around the topic of interest

## **Panel discussion**

A moderator identifies a topic that reflects the needs of members and invites a panel of two to three experts from within or outside the group to share their knowledge and experience with the group over a set period of time. The conversation can begin via a face-to-face panel discussion or a webinar, then move the conversation online. Or, the entire dialogue can be facilitated through an online discussion. The moderator should pose a question to the experts or invite community members to pose their questions to get the conversation rolling. Ask the guest experts to commit to checking the discussion board and posting responses daily during the defined period.

## **Shoot the moon**

Group members with questions they are unable to find answers to can pose their questions to the broader community. A sub-group may gather around answering this question. This initial question may lead to further discussion and a more permanent group dedicated to the topic with separate goals, or the sub-group may disband once the answer has been found.

## **Sprints**

This type of meeting brings a group together to accomplish a particular task quickly. The meeting might center on finding consensus for a particular topic or creating a tool or guidelines. Participants may meet face-to-face or be linked to the meeting remotely using web conferencing technologies, but they do see each other in some way. Having a facilitator is important to keep members focused on the main goal.

## **7. Build a sense of community.**

A sense of community encourages people to continue to participate in your group. Cultivating this can be challenging in an online setting and when members are based far from each other. Make the extra effort to help community members feel connected. Your group will be stronger and more cohesive if community members learn about each other and the work they do. It is also important they feel that their contributions add value to the group. Below are some tips to accomplish this.

- Share success stories and learning from individual group members' work.
- Seek out members to present and moderate discussions. Let participants develop content. This will give them a sense of ownership in the community.
- Encourage members to add information, expertise and accomplishments to the profiles they share via the chosen technology platform.
- Regularly highlight a "featured member" of your community.
- Welcome new members. When people sign up, make sure they are given information about the goals, focus and benefits of the group and how and where to get involved so they know what is available to them.

- Make your group a community where members benefit from contributing, even in small ways. Acknowledge contributions in documents that are created, use feedback for events and ask those who are contributing to share their work. People should feel that they have some level of influence.
- In the case of virtual groups, take advantage of any opportunities for even a few of your group members to meet face to face. For example, your group members may attend many of the same meetings and events, since you all work in the same technical area. Set a plan to get together, even if it is during lunch or breaks.
- Let members set the agenda, whether for a working group, a meeting or an event. This makes people feel involved with the community and keeps them coming back. Letting people know that you used their feedback will make them feel involved in the group.

### **Maintaining a Culture of Respect**

All community members can play a role in creating an environment for positive dialogue. Misunderstandings can easily occur when communicating across cultures and at a distance. Consider your tone before you post a message to the group and refrain from making political statements.

Acknowledging different points of view and being respectful of other's opinions will cultivate a positive space for members to share ideas.

## **8. Raise awareness of your community.**

You may need only the founding members of your community to accomplish your goals, but in most cases your community will be strengthened by drawing other people with the right knowledge and expertise to your group. Attracting the right people will keep your community focused. Here are some ways to do this.

### **Have a clear definition for the purpose of your community and what your goals are.**

The planning you did at the beginning will help establish a solid definition of the specific focus of your group and what you are trying to achieve. Share it with people that express interest in your group, and, if working online, post it in a group working space or welcome message.

### **Actively promote your community.**

Growing your group, if you want to do so, requires active promotion by all community members. Promote the community within your professional networks. Post information about how to join to relevant listservs. Reach out to people you think would be interested in contributing. Mention the group at meetings, conferences and workshops.

### **Summarize discussions.**

Occasionally task participants with summarizing information from discussions. This will help your community keep track of information that has been shared and show the broader professional community topics that have been discussed. When these summaries are finalized, share them with other colleagues or professional networks. Be sure to include contact information for those interested in joining, as well as information about the focus and goals of the group.

## **Let the larger community know about events.**

If you plan an event or have a guest presenter, make sure that people outside the community of practice know about it. Promote this event to the broader professional community and other networks you are part of. These events can get people interested in joining your specific group.

## **9. Use data to measure success and make improvements.**

Group members should work together to identify what success means to them, and the community manager and insiders should make sure that the group measures itself against these parameters by determining the appropriate indicators and targets. Set specific goals that are time bound. You could evaluate the community's performance by evaluating, for example:

- Completion of certain deliverables
- Adherence to promising practices
- Group members reporting that discussions are valuable for their work
- The number of new members that have joined the group
- The number of members that have participated in a discussion within the past two months

Keeping track of who is participating in your community and what they are talking about can also give you an idea of the health of your community.

### **Understand the drivers of participation.**

Keep an eye on the particular topic areas and activities that inspire enthusiasm and participation. Are there commonalities between them? Try to identify the most active participants, as well as whether there are distinct subgroups with some participants more interested in some topics than others. What are the trends? How can you keep adapting the group to meet needs and interests?

### **Collect feedback.**

Make sure that members know how to contact community leaders, especially the community manager. Members that want to provide feedback should be able to easily find information to do so. Utilize member polls, surveys and questionnaires to get feedback from the community, and, as much as is feasible, act on the input received where appropriate.

Host quarterly or annual online feedback sessions that allow participants to provide feedback about the group, perhaps as part of the work planning process, if the group has one.

In the case of online communities, web data also can be used to improve performance. Set up Google Analytics (<http://www.google.com/analytics/>) for your site and track which topics and posts get the most views. Share links to specific online discussions via newsletters, periodic email updates and featured discussions on the home page of your site. Then use Google Analytics to track the number of people who visit the site on the day of and day after you send out the communication. If you see a spike in the number of visitors to a discussion after you send out a communication, you can attribute the spike to your action. Tracking the number of visitors following these communications can help you to better frame messages to draw more members to the site, choose the modes of communication that members prefer and select the days of the week that work best for members to receive messages.

## Resources

The following resources may provide additional guidance in developing your online communities. But remember, the best source of information about how to best start and support your community of practice will come from your peers. Ask, listen and respond and you will be well on your way.

- Building Online Communities Brick by Virtual Brick, by Aliza Sherman (<http://gigaom.com/collaboration/building-online-community-brick-by-virtual-brick/>)
- Capitalizing Knowledge, Connecting Communities (CK2C) Communities Manual (<http://ck2c.wikispaces.com/home>)
- Communities@USAID Technical Guidance ([http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNADH222.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADH222.pdf))
- Community Management Fundamentals (<http://www.slideshare.net/rhappe/community-management-fundamentals>)
- Cultivating Communities of Practice, by Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott and William M. Snyder (Harvard Business Review Press; March 15, 2002)
- Design to Thrive: Creating Social Networks and Online Communities that Last, by Tharon W. Howard (Morgan Kaufmann; February 23, 2010)
- Online Facilitation: Lessons from the Outcome Mapping Learning Community, by Simon Hearn (<http://www.slideshare.net/sihearn/online-facilitation>)
- The Proven Path, by Richard Millington (<http://course.feverbee.com/the-proven-path/theprovenpath.pdf>)
- Revisiting the Wheel: Insights from Online Community Managers (<http://www.how-matters.org/2011/02/03/revisiting-the-wheel/>)