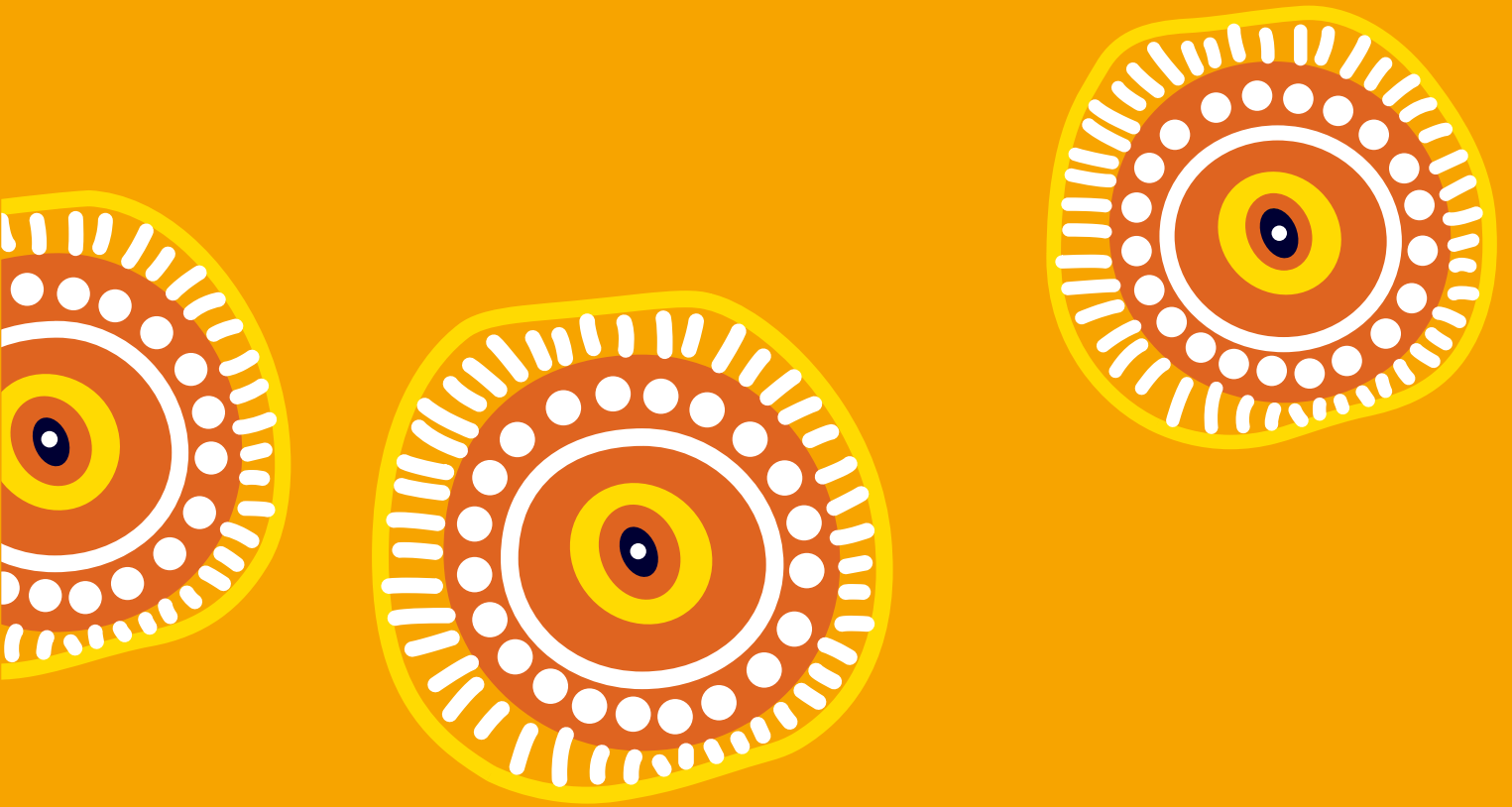




Building Communities and Networks

Women in High Performance Coaching





Australian Sports Commission Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Sports Commission (ASC) acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands where its offices are located, the Ngunnawal people and recognise any other people or families with connection to the lands of the ACT and region, the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nation, the people of the Yugambeh Nation and the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation.

The ASC extends this acknowledgment to all the Traditional Custodians of the lands and First Nations Peoples throughout Australia and would like to pay its respects to all Elders past, present and future.

The ASC recognises the outstanding contribution that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make to society and sport in Australia and celebrates the power of sport to promote reconciliation and reduce inequality.

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Communities and Networks

Supporting Women's Coaching Talent

Purpose

This toolkit provides organisations and groups with a framework to establish an effective network or community to support women coaches within a current landscape.

Who is this Toolkit for?

This toolkit has been designed for any Sporting Organisation, Club or Sport Program who has a desire to connect and support their women coaches.

The content shared within this toolkit has been based upon the work of Dr Paul Perkins: ***Coach-specific communities of practice and broader social learning systems***. We have also utilised the key insights from two nation-wide surveys conducted throughout the Women in High Performance (WiHPC) project.

Why Networks and Communities?

A key recommendation from the WiHPC is the strengthening of communities, networks and mentoring opportunities that create a sense of belonging.

Igniting and building networks and communities to support women coaches, whether this is through a formal Community of Practice (CoP) or an informal network or Social Learning Space can provide significant support for women working within the high performance sporting landscape. This is particularly important where women coaches feel / are isolated within their daily performance environment.

What is working:

- Targeted mentorship programs that support women coaches.
- Networks and communities across and within sports that build a sense of connection and belonging.
- Sharing stories makes the impact real for women coaches.

Why does this impact?

- Coaching is a social endeavour, and a social learning space can impact significantly on the development of coaches.
- Sharing challenges, learnings and experiences can support development of others.
- Networks and communities are low cost, and the impact can be significant.
- Networks and communities provide mechanisms to build relationships and connections with others.



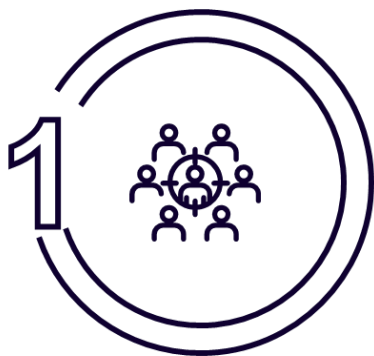
“As a head coach I lean on my connections to coaches in other sports heavily – they empower me to keep going and block out any noise – including my own self-doubts.”



Community of Practice

What is a community of practice (CoP)?

A CoP is a multi-purpose concept that grew out of a social theory of learning and the field of anthropology. It has conceptual, theoretical, and practical applications, and is a perspective **that views learning not just as an internally structured cognitive process but as a social and collaborative endeavour situated in the dynamic interactions of everyday life**. It is not an isolated construct, however, and the concept does not exist by itself. Instead, it should be considered part of a broader sociocultural system of learning that enables knowledge to be produced across entire landscapes of practice.



DOMAIN

A shared area of interest that community members are passionate about



COMMUNITY

Members learning together by using common language and negotiating boundaries of learning



PRACTICE

Creating and sharing a range of resources, tools, artifacts and Ideas

Underpinning support Community convenor and social learning leader

Interactional specialists known as **community convenors and social learning leaders** play an active role in the development process by providing critical guidance and support during sensitive periods of learning, helping with the interpretation of experiences, assisting with the translation of contemporary research into routine practice, and increasing the likelihood that interactions will remain beneficial and productive.

- Coordinating activities.
- Managing group dynamics.
- Helping members understand and apply new concepts.
- Encouraging thought leadership.
- Sharing relevant knowledge and promoting social intelligence.
- Helping with the translation of theory to practice.
- Accurately documenting and recording experiences.
- Identifying factors that support or hinder the learning process.
- Helping with the interpretation of experiences.



“CoPs are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”

- Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner

Cultivating coach-specific CoPs

Below is a list of practical steps to help guide and support the creation of coach-specific CoPs in a timely and logical way remembering that “as communities of practice emerge, we can support or encourage them, we can design for them, but we cannot design them”.



Define purpose and objectives

- Having clearly stated objectives not only provides a suitable framework to help guide the work but helps justify the actions and adds a layer of accountability for host organisations.
- What is the common interest / shared problem you are seeking to discuss / solve?



Develop project plan

- This should outline the aims and rationale of a project so that questions like the following can be answered:
 - What needs to be done?
 - When and where will the work take place?
 - Who is going to do the work?
 - How much will it cost?



Invite coaches and identify convenor and leader

- Coaches:
 - This might involve a formal application process that promotes inclusivity, or it could be done in more organic ways (e.g., word-of-mouth).
 - Consider the selection criteria and processes.
- Leadership:
 - Identify your community convenor and social learning leader. Ensure clarity of what your leadership model will look like. (Shared? Nominated?)
 - Will your facilitator(s) they need training / guidance and / or support?



Implement engagement strategies

- This is where the coaches, community convenors and social learning leaders start to interact with each other, and responsibilities, expected behaviours and social norms are created.
- Consider:
 - Face to face, virtually, online or a blend of engagement strategies.
 - Co-design a framework that ensures flexibility and negotiation.
 - Allow for and define member engagement which includes the ‘fringe dwellers’ who wish to remain on the edges with low engagement
 - The needs of the group, and shape of the group and how this will change over time.



Create highly positive and supportive learning environments

- The aim here is to development a proactive learning community where members believe that their contributions matter and feel a sense of connection with each another.

- Initially you will need to allocate time to cultivate development of trust, relationships and build engagement. Call this out as part of the early planning.
- Consider meeting more regularly early on, with potential to reduce meeting sequencing as the group progresses.



Promote a culture of continuous improvement

- This could, for example, include repeated cycles of setting objectives, learning, improving, innovating, and sharing.
- Seek deep understanding of the impact of your community.

Additional considerations for a CoP



- What are we passionate about?
- Why do we care?
- What is our agenda?
- How useful will we be to each other?

- Who should be in our community?
- What effect will their participation have on the dynamics of the group?
- How do we manage the boundaries of our community?

- What should we do to learn together?
- How can our practice become the curriculum?
- How can we make our work visible and impactful?

- What is required to carry out a productive inquiry?
- How can we encourage shared leadership?
- > What resources are available to support our work?

The Social Learning Facilitator

The Social Learning Leader / Facilitator plays an active role in facilitating and connecting group environments, to enable growth and development through critical guidance, support, and accurate documentation of practice. They develop meaningful actions and reflection practices into the community of practice construct.



“I remember having a much deeper and trusting connection with colleagues and peers. To be part of a group that showed such vulnerability and perseverance, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to learn from them.”

- Anonymous WiHPC Coach

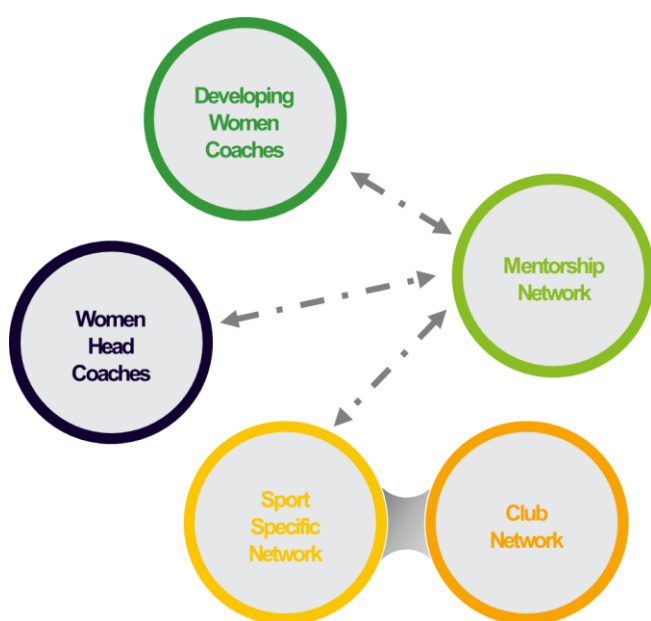
Connecting Communities and Networks

Communities of practice (CoP) should not be seen as isolated entities, focused only on a localised and situated workplace practice. They are elements of broader interrelated social systems that are dependent on each other for the scalability of learning across entire Landscapes of Practice (LoPs).

Understanding the landscape that supports women coaches and connecting with aligned and mutually beneficial CoPs presents additional opportunities for learning, development, and support.

Connecting Communities

Consider the benefits of connecting one highly effective community to another. What could this look like and what benefit does this provide?



- This can broaden diversity and shared experiences and provide opportunities.
- This can provide opportunities for divergent thinking and growth.
- It can extend interaction and participation.
- It could be a component that evolves over time.
- This could involve occasional visitors or become a regular occurrence to invite others into the group.
- This could connect a founding CoP to a broader network for Mentorship, Allyship or Sponsorship.

Considerations are:

- Alignment of the connecting groups regarding needs, values, and purpose.
- Timing of connections and intent.
- Anticipated outcomes.
- Mechanisms for connection and ongoing interactions.
- Evaluation of impact.

What is a Social Learning Space?

Although a relatively new and lesser known concept, Social Learning Spaces (SLSs) are similar to CoPs in so much as they both encourage meaningful interactions and the reformulations of ideas. It emerged in response to criticism that learning within a CoP tended to be conditional on members belonging to a shared domain of practice with the same regime of competence. That idea has been revised, however, and it is now proposed that very effective learning can take place within the social spaces outside CoPs via a range of inexpensive and highly effective mechanisms, including:

- Yarning with peers.
- Participating with colleagues in formal and non-formal coach learning events.
- Online catch ups with peers and colleagues.
- Sporadic post-training conversations with other coaches and athletes.
- One-off chance meetings at conferences, competitions and/or workshops.
- Engaging in networking activities.

Regardless of where they arise or how they occur, it is important not to think of SLSs as physical domains but as the structural features and personal characteristics that promote and enable learning to take place across a range of settings. These traits and features are summarised below using a coach development context.

SOCIAL LEARNING SPACE



Caring to make a difference:

Coaches engage in the space because they see an opportunity to share an idea, pursue an inquiry, enhance an existing capability, or further develop themselves.

A willingness to engage in the uncertainty:

Coaches are willing and prepared to address their concerns about being involved in any potential projects (e.g., To what extent is this possible? What's required to carry out the work? Is it worth my time and effort?)

An ability to pay attention:

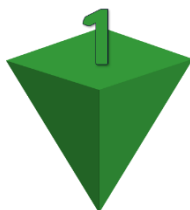
Coaches are prepared and have an ability to challenge their own assumptions, be open to new ideas, consider alternative points-of-view, and resist certain opinions and/or forms of feedback.

Building a CoP or Social Learning Space?

The decision around building a CoP or creating a Social Learning Space will depend on the purpose and needs of the participants. In some instances, the community you create may combine a few different elements of a CoP and it could clearly change over time.

Social learning spaces have a greater degree of flexibility and do not have the same structural and interactional requirements. Initiating the process will be driven by people who feel strongly about an issue, and they are prepared to invest time and effort to explore it, even when the outcomes and objectives are not clear.

Some tips to assist you to get started are:



CLARITY

- Ensure clarity with purpose and roles.
- Ensure you have a facilitator to ignite and lead the group, particularly in early stages to set the framework (ask for assistance if needed).



COMMUNICATE

- Communication and facilitation skills are critical.
- Ensure rules of engagement are clear.
- Arrange for additional support if needed.
- Sharing stories builds community, empowers, and inspires action amongst women coaches.
- Sharing the stories of lived experiences of those who are impacted can drive change.



CONNECTIONS and BELONGING

- Being connected and feeling like you belong is fundamental to sharing and being heard.
- Target strategies to build foundations for connection and belonging.
- Be deliberate in your design and take the time to build trust and connections.

Networks Supporting HP Women Coaches

Throughout the Women in High Performance Coaching Project, we heard some great examples of where a Community / Social Learning Space is working well.



Diving Australia

The Mentoring Group was initiated by Vyninka Arlow, Diving Australia National Pathway Coach who wanted to create an inclusive group for female coaches across the NIN and State bodies in Australia.

[CLICK HERE TO READ MORE](#)



South Australian Sports Institute

The group is led by a collective group of women coaches within SASI and comprises of approximately 20 women coaches. The group uses bi-monthly meetings to create cross sport connection and experiences for coaches and leaders.

[CLICK HERE TO READ MORE](#)



Athletics Australia - WiHPC

Ignited by a targeted mentoring program, a community of support for Women High Performance Coaches in Athletics has continued to provide support for women coaches, long after the program concluded.

[CLICK HERE TO READ MORE](#)

Additional resources to support the development of a Community of Practice are:



[Coach-specific communities of practice and broader social learning systems by Dr Paul Perkins](#)



WEBPAGE: [Communities of Practice | Coach](#)

Insights from the WiHPC Project Surveys

These insights have been highlighted through two nationwide surveys conducted throughout the WiHPC Project.



VALUE OF LEARNING

Development opportunities are limited by highly valued.

They are valued for the content and the networks they create.



ENVIRONMENT

Connection was integral, independent of gender or learning environment.

Connection was the most dominant theme, with the context for why varying at the level of the individual.



CONNECTION, SAFETY, SUPPORT

Importance of connection, safety and support is real as a part of the female experience.

Whether determined through the outcomes of narratives, or identified as key themes through natural language processing, connection for safety and support was a unique characteristic of women's experiences.



NEW PROGRAMS

New programs should explore continuity and expansion.

Regardless of gender, some key considerations for future programs are related to provision of more time for development, and also building towards the development of a larger expanded community of practice.

Understanding Connection

A Retrospective Survey of 156 participants participating in Gendered learning Programs highlighted the following elements:

Support and Inspiration

- Connection for women in gendered programs took the form of building robust and ongoing networks which created SUPPORT and INSPIRATION with the in-person delivery of programs playing an important role in this. Conversely, COVID affecting in person program delivery negatively affected the ability to build relationships.

Mechanism for learning

- Connection was also demonstrated through the importance of connection to others as a mechanism for learning. This was evident in the important role that other participants stories, and the process of storytelling had, as a mechanism for learning an understanding. This also came with a strong emphasis on connection to, and the importance of facilitators in the programs.



"... not only did I learn about myself and my decision-making process but the support I got from the facilitators and participants has had a life changing impact..."

-Anonymous WiHPC Coach



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