Activities for Stimulating Knowledge Sharing and Learning

A TOPS Quick Guide to Linking Development Practitioners

The TOPS Program

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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.

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Acknowledgements

Activities for Stimulating Knowledge Sharing and Learning 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 among development practitioners. This quick guide provides development practitioners of all technical sectors with a menu of activities that can be used to foster program and organizational learning. This quick guide format is written and organized in a way to allow implementers to quickly select, plan, and implement an activity without feeling overwhelmed with details.

This quick guide had many contributors[1], including Jindra Cekan (consultant), Joan Whelan (USAID, formerly with TOPS/CORE Group), Ann Hendrix-Jenkins (Palladium, formerly CORE Group), Lenette Golding (Palladium), Patrick Coonan (TOPS/CORE Group), and Shelia Jackson (TOPS/CORE Group).

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[1] Names and organizations of contributors are listed as they were in 2014.

[2] Names and organizations of interview participants are listed as they were in 2012.

Introduction

This guide offers food security and nutrition practitioners a variety of methods and techniques for designing knowledge sharing activities to enhance learning at the program and organizational level. Each activity has been tested and found useful by development practitioners. Some of the activities emerged during interviews conducted by TOPS in 2012 with organizational leaders and knowledge management staff at international development organizations. Others were selected from knowledge management practitioners of the TOPS FSN Network Knowledge Management Task Force. All of the activities highlighted in this guide have been implemented by international development organizations working in food security and nutrition, and global health programming.

The majority of the knowledge sharing activities presented in this guide are designed to be done in person. Food security and nutrition practitioners work around the world and cannot always meet face-to-face. Geographic constraints present a unique challenge to knowledge sharing and. Technology serves as an excellent medium for connecting individuals who cannot meet face-to-face regardless of location. This guide offers suggestions for utilizing technology to enhance the quality and reach of knowledge sharing activities when meeting in person is not possible.

Participatory Meeting Design

Use This Activity To…	Ensure meetings are engaging and productive
Time Required	Varies according to the size and length of the meeting. Preparation is the key so allow yourself plenty of time to plan
Set Up	Varies according to the meeting's goals and objectives
Supplies	Varies according to format
Output	Better meetings; Increased participation by meeting attendees

Participatory meeting design transforms meetings into events where everyone participates and learns from one another. Participatory meeting design techniques are structured to encourage the exchange of knowledge and keep people engaged. A participatory meeting design technique is selected based upon a meeting's objectives. **What you want to accomplish will help you to choose which participatory meeting design technique to use to help achieve the meeting's objectives**. Reserve time at the end of all meetings for recap, capturing key content and ideas, and planning next steps.

Below are some ideas to make your meeting more participatory.

- **Walking meetings** are a pleasant way for two or three people to meet while enjoying physical exercise.
- **Small group work** is an effective way to get people to participate who are uncomfortable with speaking up in a meeting. Small groups create a more informal atmosphere that put people at ease and encourage even the most hesitant person to contribute.
- **Idea round robins** give everyone in the meeting an opportunity to participate. Each person is given 1-3 minutes to present an idea, react to a challenge or make announcements.
- **Online meeting platforms** provide virtual participants with the means to interact and share just as they would in a face-to-face meeting. Features including whiteboards, voting tools, the ability to break into small groups, and chat boxes allow participants to engage and learn from one another.[3]

Key Questions

What are we trying to accomplish at this meeting? What is the best way to design the meeting so that we effectively share and learn?

Leveraging Technology

Most participatory activities could convert to a webinar platform. The key is to list out and think through each activity of your meeting and then consider how it would translate to an online space.

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[3] For more ideas, check out *Designing Participatory Meetings and Brownbags: A TOPS Quick Guide to Linking Development Practitioners* (2013) by The TOPS Program

Participatory Meeting Design

Games

Use This Activity To...	Motivate and enable staff to learn about complex systems and build relationships
Time Required	A game can be an event that takes place over a couple of hours or a series of activities that take place over several weeks
Set Up	Varies according to game format
Supplies	Varies according to game format
Output	Knowledge deepened; Complex systems better understood; Relationships built

Games create excitement around learning and knowledge sharing. They help to promote teamwork, strengthen relationships and breakdown complex systems into manageable pieces of information that can be easily understood. Scavenger hunts, quiz shows, games where points are gained for completing tasks and contests that involve challenges are all examples of games that can be used for learning and knowledge sharing. Whatever the format, it is important the objectives are meaningful, rules and timelines are clear, and learning is captured and shared.

Key Questions

Are the objectives for the game meaningful? Does the game help to achieve its objectives?

Leveraging Technology

Webinar platforms provide a way for people in diverse geographic locations to participate. Features such as breakout rooms provide space for team members to engage with each other in real-time dialogue.

Examples

Technoserve developed webinar-based games to create the *2011 Knowledge Olympics*. Events such as "Training of Trainers High-jump to Improve Training Skills" were designed to improve gender programming and encourage use of the organization's Internet platform. The events were held in English and Spanish prompting networking between Latin American and Spanish-speaking colleagues in Africa. Collaboration continues as African staff has flown to Latin America to support proposals and work on implementation challenges.

Webinars

Use This Activity To…	Enable staff to stay up-to-date on emerging topics and technical developments
Time Required	One hour to 90 minutes
Set Up	Webinar platform
Supplies	Presentation and webinar platform
Output	Technical presentation followed by discussion

Keeping on top of new information and trends in the continually evolving and the globally dispersed field of food security and nutrition is a challenge. Webinars provide a means for geographically diverse practitioners to connect and learn from each other.

The following guidance will help you to plan and execute a webinar.

- Identifying a topic that will be of interest to your audience.
- Invite a relevant expert(s) with good presentation skills to speak at your webinar.
- Schedule a time to test the webinar platform with the presenter(s) to ensure that their internet connection, audio and microphone are working properly.
- **During the webinar, assign someone to moderate the chat box. The chat box moderator will greet participants as they enter the room and encourage people to "talk" to each other and type in questions during the presentation.**
- The typical time breakdown for a 90 minute webinar is:
    - The presenter(s) talk for 40 minutes
    - Followed by 30 minutes for questions
    - The remaining 20 minutes are used for introductions, thank yous and announcements.
- **Be sure to record the webinar to capture knowledge shared and allow those who could not attend to access the webinar at their convenience.**

Key Questions

What new learning is happening in food security and nutrition? What emerging topics are people interested in? Who is a presenter that can speak about a topic?

Leveraging Technology

Webinar platforms are an excellent technology for connecting groups or hosting knowledge sharing activities. The key to making webinars go beyond a one-way presentation is to fully utilize the participatory features of the platform such as the chat box, polling feature and breakout rooms.

Communities of Practice

Use This Activity To…	Encourage and promote knowledge exchange between people working in a similar practice area
Time Required	Ongoing
Set Up	In person, over the telephone, discussion forums, listservs, and/or webinar platform
Supplies	N/A
Output	Relationships built; Networks formed; Knowledge and experience shared

Communities of practice convene a group of people to facilitate the strengthening of relationships and the ongoing sharing of experiences and knowledge in a particular practice area. Technology has made it easier to link members of a community of practice across organizations, countries, and time zones to accomplish work collaboratively, solve problems and learn from one another.

Starting a community of practice (CoP) can be an effective way of supporting learning across your program, organization or between organizations. Keep in mind that communities evolve over time and **building a community of practice requires investing time and energy**. Over time, the needs of the community might shift or require a response to emerging challenges. Be flexible and adapt as the needs of the community change.

Below are some best practices for starting and growing a CoP[4]:

- **Define the purpose of your community**. Make sure that your purpose is clear, specific and relevant to those you are working with and others you intend to reach out to.
- **Identify and reach out to potential members**. If you are forming a new community, invite people to be cofounders.
- **Determine the knowledge and experience your community has and needs**. Get to know your members, specifically their knowledge assets and expectations, so that together you can create learning opportunities that draw upon the knowledge and experience of members and satisfy their needs.
- **Define roles and responsibilities**. The more structured a group—for example, having defined tasks and deliverables—the more concrete the roles will need to be. Work with the group to determine which roles need to be filled in order for you to achieve your goals.
- **Select tools and technologies**. In low-resource environments or in situations where participants work in close proximity to one another, face-to-face meetings may be sufficient, but in other cases, think through the particular combination of technologies that can help people to connect at their convenience and that best suits the needs of your community.
- **Establish a rhythm of activity**. Establishing routines, such as recurring discussion events, dialogues with experts and periodic meetings, is an important step in generating momentum and laying the foundation for a strong community of practice. Develop a plan and schedule of events to keep members engaged and make your group more productive.

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[4] Adapted from *Supporting Communities of Practice: A TOPS Quick Guide to Linking Development Practitioners (Version 2)* by The TOPS Program

- **Build a sense of community**. Fostering a sense of community will encourage members to invest more in the group. Select strategies that will help promote a sense of community by reaching out to participants to get to know them, and by creating opportunities for participants to get to know one another.
- **Raise awareness of your community**. Adding new members can be a good way to grow your community, but at a certain point, bringing in new members without deepening and sustaining engagement can undermine the group. Determine what a good size for the group would be. Advertise your group and reach out to new members if you feel your group can afford to add some additional people. As you grow, remember the importance of maintaining a specific relevant area of focus to your core members.

Key Questions

What practice area generates interest and excitement? Which program or staff members with experience to share or a strong desire to learn can be identified to become a core member of the community of practice? How can you strengthen relationships between community members and establish a rhythm of activity?

Leveraging Technology

Communities of practice often require participants to have some face-to-face time to help establish a sense of connection and community. Reoccurring webinars, an open group Skype chat, and establishing an online discussion forum or a listserv are excellent ways to keep members connected between face-to-face encounters. **Establishing a listserv, chat, or discussion forum in and of itself is likely to flounder if there is not a dedicated community organizer seeding discussion and stimulating conversation among group members on a regular basis**.

Examples

Land O'Lakes used communities of practice to promote project-level learning. The process of establishing a CoP began with a conversation with the Chief of Party, who identified key staff to participate. Each community had a practice manager who was responsible for connecting with members to build relationships and organize meetings. A website with an open discussion board was created for each CoP where members posted questions and exchanged information. Community members, especially those from a different culture, who may be hesitant to ask a question in an open forum, emailed the practice manager their inquiry. The practice manager then posted the question to the discussion board.

Mapping

Use This Activity To…	Help participants better understand processes, networks, and systems
Time Required	One to two hours
Set Up	A room with tables and enough space for participants to be able to spread out
Supplies	Large sheets of paper or whiteboards, markers, and other supplies as needed
Output	Map of a process, system, or network

Maps help us to understand complex systems or networks through visual representation. They further enhance our understanding by using features such as line color and thickness to illustrate importance or type of relationships between two entities. A mapping exercise affords people the opportunity to directly engage with a system or network making sense of its intricacy through the process of transforming pieces of information into connected images.

Structure your mapping activity using the following steps:

- Select a network, system or process to be mapped.
- Consider having the group create a customized map(s) through one of the following approaches:
  - Have small groups separately create maps of the same concept and then bring the groups together to compare, contrast and dive deeper
  - Have small groups create maps representing different concepts, and bring them together to share and discuss
  - Work together to create a map collectively, but not if your group has more than 10 people
- Give participants an example of a completed map or give them concrete suggestions for how to illustrate complex relationships.
- Schedule enough time for each group to present and discuss their maps. Ensure that the facilitator prepares probing questions to dig deeper into the similarities and differences between maps, and to surface the nuances of the complex concepts illustrated. Ask groups to focus on "takeaway ideas" and ideas for how to act on what is being discussed. Allow for sharing of the unexpected results.
- Find a place to post the results (either online or in a physical location that the participants frequent) and make plans for next steps.

Key Questions

Who or what is most connected and least connected in the system or network? How does this matter for the work that we do?

Leveraging Technology

Many webinar platforms allow participants to set up whiteboards that could be used to draw maps and illustrate connections. After creating the map, the illustration could be added to a website or portal shared among the group.

Mentoring and Coaching

Use This Activity To...	Establish person-to-person relationships that enable the sharing of experiences and expertise in a subject area
Time Required	One hour every week or two for a pre-defined amount of time
Set Up	Pair-up two people based upon levels of experience in a subject area
Supplies	If face-to-face exchanges are not possible, use the telephone, VOIP, or a webinar platform to interact
Output	Relationships formed; Knowledge and expertise shared

Mentoring or coaching matches an individual with a higher degree of experience and expertise in a particular subject area with an individual with less experience and expertise in the same subject area. The primary objective for the mentoring or coaching relationship is to pass along lessons and promising practices learned over the years by the more experienced individual to the less experienced individual. However, these interactions can also help more seasoned individuals to think outside-of-the-box by exposing them to new technologies, trends, or innovations that the less-experienced individual has learned about or experimented with.

Mentoring and coaching pairs can meet in-person or connect through technology. The interactions are meant to be informal, but participants will benefit from having clear guidelines for determining the frequency of meetings and expectations for sharing and learning. This is an initiative that may work best by starting small establishing one pair, then arranging other pairs along the way. **Review and evaluate the program regularly using the learning to improve and develop the mentoring or coaching program.**

Key Questions

Who has a lot of knowledge on a topic and might help someone with that learning? How can we develop mentoring or coaching relationships?

Leveraging Technology

If mentoring or coaching pairs cannot meet face-to-face, encourage them to connect over the phone, through email, or using VOIP technology (e.g. Skype).

Poster Session

Use This Activity To…	Share program or subject matter learning
Time Required	One to three hours, depending on the size of the group and number of presenters
Set Up	A large room, wall space for posters, tables for display
Supplies	Posters from participants
Output	Knowledge and ideas shared; Relationships formed

A poster session is an event in which programmatic and subject area knowledge can be shared through direct interaction between presenter and participant. Poster sessions have the added benefit of helping relationships to develop and networks to form as people exchange knowledge and expertise in a relaxed atmosphere.

The guidance below will help you to organize your poster session.

- Consult with a group of people to determine a theme which will be of the most interest and help to participants. Theme ideas include program information and updates, research findings and new data, promising practices, lessons learned, or emerging topics.
- Put out a call for theme-based poster presentations. Instruct presenters to make a poster explaining their program or subject area through pictures, graphics and text.
- Choose a space for the poster session that allows presenters room to spread out, hang posters on the wall and display additional materials.
- During the poster session, have presenters stay with their posters to answer questions and engage with participants.

Key Questions

What themes will help encourage presenters to share valuable information and ideas? How can we encourage meaningful interactions during the session?

Knowledge Sharing Awards

Use This Activity To...	Incentivize knowledge sharing to promote organizational and programmatic learning
Time Required	Enough time to design and launch a thoughtful award system – once in place, little time is required
Set Up	Support from interested colleagues to help design the system. Buy-in from organizational or programmatic leadership to implement the recognition system
Supplies	Certificates and/or prizes
Output	Knowledge sharing incentivized

An award system helps to highlight the value an organization or program places on knowledge sharing and learning. The system can be leveraged to disseminate knowledge sharing practices throughout an organization or program by recognizing the work of individuals and teams. **Publicizing the winners' accomplishments signals that knowledge sharing and learning are priorities for the program or organization**.

An award system can be created for which any staff person can nominate a colleague for recognition of excellence in knowledge sharing. One or more staff members need to be responsible for maintaining and cultivating the system. Winners may be announced at meetings, in an email, posted on an Intranet, or through other established communication methods.

Key Questions

What does knowledge sharing excellence mean in our organization or program? What kind of awards would best incentivize knowledge sharing?

Leveraging Technology

Make videos of winners to post online and disseminate throughout the organization or program to further promote the award system and widely communicate knowledge sharing accomplishments of winners.

Examples

At CARE, senior managers in each country office recognize the contributions of field staff during an awards ceremony. Field staff often feel discounted from the rest of the organization. An award makes clear that the leadership knows who they are and values their contributions.

Counterpart International instituted an annual Knowledge Management award of $1,000 that's given to a field team for excellence in knowledge management.

Catholic Relief Services offers staff professional development opportunities as a reward for high performance—such as training, travel to other countries, and attending internal regional meetings.

After Action Review

Use This Activity To...	Improve future events and activities by capturing lessons learned and new ideas
Time Required	15 minutes to one hour
Set Up	In person, over the telephone, or webinar platform
Supplies	Materials to capture lessons learned and ideas: paper and pens, markers, index cards, sticky notes, etc.
Output	Lessons learned captured; Ideas for improvement generated

An After Action Review (AAR) is a process used to capture the lessons learned and new ideas from events and activities with the goal of improving future performance. An AAR can be facilitated during and/or at the end of an event or activity as an opportunity to reflect on what was intended to happen, what actually happened and what can be done better next time. The steps below will help to organize and carry out an After Action Review.[5] Modify the steps to adhere to your event's or activity's context.

- Schedule the AAR as soon as possible after the event or activity while it is still fresh in people's memories.
- Invite all staff and key stakeholders involved in the event or activity to the AAR.
- Acknowledge at the beginning of the session that everyone should participate regardless of involvement level or job title. Explain that AARs are learning events rather than critiques and should not be treated as personal performance evaluation.
- Appoint a facilitator. Explain that the facilitator is not there to 'have' answers, but to guide the discussion so that all may learn.
- Appoint a note taker to capture the lessons learned and ideas for improvement.
- The facilitator begins the AAR by asking 'what went well?' The note taker captures the participant's comments.
- The facilitator then asks 'what did not go so well?' The facilitator reminds everyone that the aim is to identify a problem, not blame a person(s).
- Comparing what went well with what did not go so well, participants compile a list of what can be done better next time. The note taker records the actions for improvement.
- **The actions are put into an action plan and reviewed at the beginning of the planning phase for a similar event or activity to ensure improvements are made and mistakes are not repeated.**

Key Questions

What went well? What did not go so well? What can be done better next time?

Leveraging Technology

Consider using VOIP (e.g. Skype) or a webinar platform to connect with staff and key stakeholders who are unable to attend a face-to-face AAR.

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[5] Adapted from *Learning to Fly* by Chris Collison.

Additional Resources

The following are a brief selection of resources that offer further support and discussion on the use of the activities described above.

Additional resources on conducting knowledge management-focused activities can be found in the FSN Network Resource Library (fsnnetwork.org/resource-library).

Guides

A Gardener's Guide to Communities of Practice. The World Bank Group. 2013

Designing Participatory Meetings and Brownbags: A TOPS Quick Guide to Linking Development Practitioners. The TOPS Program. 2013

How to Hold a Successful Share Fair. K4Health et al. 2015

The Art of Knowledge Exchange: A Results-Focused Planning Guide for Development Practitioners. World Bank. 2010

Supporting Communities of Practice: A TOPS Quick Guide to Linking Development Practitioners. The TOPS Program. 2013

100 Ways to Energise Groups: Games to use in workshops, meetings and the community. International HIV/AIDS Alliance. 2002

Books

Learning to Fly: Practical Lessons from One of the World's Leading Knowledge Companies. Geoff Parcell, Chris Collison. Capstone. 2001