#### Prevention spotlight:

# The transformative power that is Communities of Practice

Communities of Practice (CoP) provide a unique opportunity for professionals to come together to share their expertise and resources, and to troubleshoot challenges in a safe and expert-led environment. Building a robust and connected prevention of violence sector has been at the heart of DVRCV's CoP pilot program³ over the past two years. Here we unpack the process participants underwent and learn why CoP is an important workforce strategy.

### What are communities of practice and why are they important?

According to leading innovators in this space, a community of practice refers to a 'group of people who share a concern. set of problems, or passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis."4 Within the prevention of violence against women and family violence workforce, practitioners come from such diverse organisations, dispersed locations and varied settings that it often results in feelings of isolation that inhibits their ability to work effectively. Because of this isolated nature of their work, CoP brings practitioners together in a safe setting that encourages collaboration, strengthens evidencebased practice and develops a consistent approach. All of which builds a more unified, cohesive and professional support system.

## How does DVRCV's Communities of Practice work?

Each of DVRCV's CoP series consisted of five workshops over a six-month period. DVRCV modelled their pilot program on the five developmental stages of a typical CoP as outlined in Figure One below.<sup>5</sup>

DVRCV's CoP sessions focussed primarily on the 'coalescing phase'. The nature of the sessions meant it took a few meetings to move through this phase because participants needed time to build the trust and feel safe in expressing the fears and challenges they face in their work. This required emotional management by a facilitator skilled in guiding participants through their discomfort and vulnerability as they shared and engaged in challenging (and potentially confronting) conversations. By interrogating their own and one another's



# Shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we are capable of change.

Brene Brown

Potential

A loose network of people recognises common interests around a key issue.

The community establishes the value of sharing knowledge and develops relationships and sufficient trust.

The community clarifies its focus, role and boundaries, and then shifts from sharing tips to developing a body of knowledge.

Stewardship

The community maintains its relevance and voice, keeps the tone and focuses on living and engaging.

The community will split into new communities or they merge with other communities. Sometimes they may lose relevance and dissipate.

prejudices, values and assumptions about gender and privilege, discomfort and vulnerability naturally arose in the group discussions. One of the strategies employed in this process was in-depth, reflective exercises in which participants unpacked their fears of being wrong or judged, and then considered how these emotions restricted their own development and work.

To support participants overcome any shame, the CoP focused largely on building self-awareness and emotion management

skills in a professional context. These skills and capabilities could then be taken back to their work settings and communities. Like the ripples in a pond, these emotion management capabilities then have the potential to impact and influence the people around them.

### Facilitation and the importance of emotion management

Skilled and knowledgeable facilitation is vital in supporting participants to develop

<sup>3</sup> Each CoP consisted of five sessions. The CoPs were funded through the Partners in Prevention and Free from Violence – Workforce Capability Building projects. In total, six series of CoPs were delivered with three co-delivered in partnership with Our Watch.

Wenger, E, McDermott, R and Snyder, W (2002) Cultivating Communities of Practice: A guide to managing knowledge, Harvard Business School Press, Boston.

<sup>5</sup> ibio



'To share ideas and the commitment and be on the same wavelength is such a special bond. It gives me hope – change is slow but it will make a huge and positive impact on our overall community. I feel honoured and grateful to have been a part of this group.'

Participant



Image by Nitya Wakhlu

reflective practice and the know-how to navigate their unique prevention work. Moreover, facilitators need to be caring and empathetic in order to create a safe and trusting space in which participants can freely express themselves without fear of judgement. Also needed is the skill-set to design and facilitate the creative exercises and critical conversations to encourage personal and group reflection. Above all, facilitators need to be able to delicately navigate the group through tensions and disagreements, and respond appropriately to reflections and emotions as they arise.

Underpinning it all is the imperative of having a solid understanding of primary prevention theory and approaches to support participants to: (a) navigate their way through this work and (b) effectively handle challenges or resistance when trying to gain support from their workplaces and communities.

#### Community is connection and collaboration

Through sharing, supporting and encouraging, the connections created in each CoP provided an important ecosystem, one that enables practitioners to keep their passion and commitment alive as they navigate their daily challenges. Most importantly, the close relationships fostered within this ecosystem continues and sustains them to engender on-

going patience, empathy and an open mind within communities.

When participants looked back months after completing DVRCV's CoP pilot, they recognised the importance of collaborative learning and mutual support for their work in the prevention of violence against women. For most, CoP not only met their learning needs, it also strengthened their emotional and professional resilience. They reported having a more cohesive and shared understanding of what primary prevention is and how to get others on board in supporting the important work they do.

The one criticism all participants and facilitators agreed about was the need for more sessions. Best practice research has shown that, ideally, a CoP would be ongoing for the life of a project or the community it is supporting. However, limitations on the funding cycle meant that the CoP met only four to five times over six months, and in that time, were unable to move through all five stages. Prevention work requires practitioners to continually question gender structures and norms, and imbalances of social power, as well as their own values. assumptions and prejudices. None of this stops after a workshop. In fact, it is only the beginning of a life-long process of individual and collective transformation.



'[The facilitators] were gentle and gave us space to reflect. You never felt like you were taking too much time...the flow of the facilitation helped nurture the group.'

Participant

