
When Convenings Work

Design Choices That Made the Difference

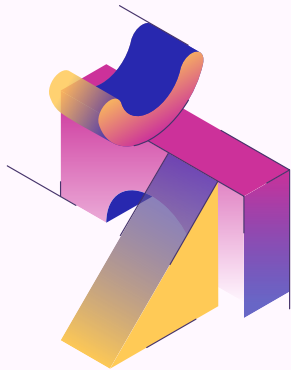
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Communities of practice exist to create shared learning, trust, and progress that individual organizations cannot achieve alone. Too often, however, convenings fall short—polite, presentation-heavy, and disconnected activities—preventing meaningful discourse and progress. Participants often share what's safe, learning stays at the surface-level, and impact dissipates once everyone goes home.

This past year, something different happened. In the Innovative Assessment Community of Practice (CoP), funded by the Gates Foundation, participants showed up engaged and candid in their collaboration. Representatives from ANet, Carnegie Learning, Khan Academy, and New Meridian tested assumptions, shared real challenges, and helped one another navigate complex go-to-market decisions. And they continued to advance that work outside of the CoP. Those outcomes were not accidental. They are the result of several reinforcing design conditions.

Participant-Centered Experience

Intentionally small, the three CoP convenings were attended by just three or four leaders from each organization. Agendas were built from participant input gathered through interviews, surveys, and ongoing conversations. Support partners used feedback following each convening to directly shape the next. The goal was to connect learning directly to where organizations were in their development and sales cycles, calibrating the right level of challenge and support for their go-to-market journeys. Across gatherings, attendees described the experience as timely, usable, and responsive. Grounding the experience in participant needs also opened space for another critical design choice: bringing the perspectives of those closest to the work into the room.

Real Stakeholder Perspectives

To ground strategy in real-world context, educators, students, caregivers, and school and district leaders were integrated into each of the convenings—not as token speakers, but as essential voices shaping discussion. One convening was hosted inside a school during a school day where students, staff, and community members shared their experiences with assessments in the very place they encounter them. Hearing directly from stakeholders grounded strategy conversations in real constraints and needs, helping participants test assumptions and sharpen priorities. That direct input deepened empathy, learning, and accountability.

Interactive, Adaptive Design

In addition to stakeholder engagement, the design of the convenings emphasized structured dialogue, workshops, and collaborative problem-solving rather than presentations. Each convening had a clear throughline which connected both across sessions and to the various supports grantees were receiving from the foundation. Facilitators adapted in real time based on participant energy and needs, prioritizing depth over agenda completion. Participants were able to adapt and test new hypotheses with experts during office hours. The planning team's lived experience across classrooms, districts, and market launch ensured the work stayed grounded and practical, with students and educators at the center.

Aligned Support Partners

Well before the first convening, the three technical assistance and facilitation support partners aligned on roles, expertise, workflows, and success indicators and collaborated closely throughout the year to ensure a coherent experience for participants. Intentional Futures, EdSolutions, and Lyons Assessment Consulting each had established relationships with both the Gates Foundation and grantees, allowing the team to move quickly into high-value work rather than duplicative relationship-building. This collaboration model, which emphasizes community over competition, created coherence and modeled the culture the CoP aimed to foster.

Strong Funder Stewardship

The foundation also played an important stewardship role, beginning with thoughtful participant selection. The fact that the four grantees shared complementary goals without being direct competitors, created space for candor and risk-taking. The timing also mattered: each organization was early enough in the work to still shape direction, but far enough along to apply insights immediately. The sponsor set expectations clearly from the outset: participation meant meaningful engagement, rather than passive attendance, with a promise of activities that were meaningful, customized and actionable. This combination established norms of trust, rigor, and contribution early.

Trust as the Throughline

High levels of trust enabled participants to engage honestly and vulnerably. Facilitation emphasized psychological safety, and collaboration across consulting partners reinforced norms of openness and shared problem-solving. Behind the scenes, support partners maintained a steady cadence of sensemaking with one another and the foundation, sharing insights and gut-checking assumptions. Trust became both an input to the work and a durable outcome.

What This Suggests for Future Communities

Effective communities of practice do not happen by chance. Today's CEOs are managing multiple grants each with their own technical assistance programs, while navigating dramatic technology and market shifts; time is their most precious resource. This community of practice underscores several design lessons:



Participant experience must feel timely, relevant, and usable.



Demand-side voices strengthen relevance and accountability.



Early alignment among support partners accelerates impact.



Invisible work (e.g., planning, facilitation, synthesis) drives outcomes.



Coherence across convenings builds momentum and deepens insight.



Curation and expectation-setting enable openness and learning.



Trust must be intentionally designed.

When these conditions are present, convenings become more than events. They become accelerators for learning, alignment, and impact.

Learn more about the supporting partners: [Intentional Futures](#), [EdSolutions](#), and [Lyons Assessment Consulting](#).

Our appreciation to the Gates Foundation for its stewardship, to participating organizations for their openness and commitment, and to the educators, students, and community members who shared their perspectives with generosity and honesty.

Views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the foundation.