

Online Community Toolkit

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Overview

“Community” is a word with many definitions. It means different thing to different people. “Online community” means different things to different people too. What I mean in this toolkit is a collection of people, joined together mainly through an networked asynchronous computer platform, in which the participants develop various individual and group relationships in ways that make sense to them, either personally, profesionally or both. It achieves its community status through the weaving of those relationships, and its sense of community is held in common by the will of the participants themselves. A true measure of it being a real community is if the people using it consider themselves to part of a real community, even if most interactions take place in a virtual space.

At its heart, an online community is all about relationships. It is well proven that it is possible for people to experience authentic depth in these relationships, even when chiefly communicating via networked computers.

Good planning is essential in most endeavors. It is especially true when building an online community service because once you set everything up and “open the doors” you as manager will set the tone, guide and influence the community, but its culture will come from the people who use it. They will develop habits of use that will become their routines. Once these habits and mores of the community are set, they are almost impossible for you to change.

This toolkit is designed to lay out for you the essential questions and issues you must consider and address in order to succeed in building such a community online.

It is formatted into four categories: platform, people, management and externals. Each category starts with the questions you need to address, each followed by commentary that will help you find answers that work for you.

Platform

• Is your software optimized for community conversation?

There are a great many options available, ranging from free and open source to quite expensive. Cost alone is not a criterion by which you should judge. Instead consider whether the platform is easy enough for someone new to understand that they don’t need to spend a lot of time reading a manual or asking a lot of questions before engaging with other people. This includes the basic layout, the ease of finding subject matter, the editor, and whether or not you can navigate around without getting lost. But an easy-to-use system may not be sophisticated enough, once you have learned the basics. If it does not allow you to “self graduate” to more power use, you will become frustrated. Facebook is a good example of such a system.

Most important, does the system remember what you have read in every conversation you visit, right down to the specific comment and then automatically

take you to what is new? If not, find a system that does. Some platforms are designed for publishing or blogging more than for conversation, even if they include user comments. Those platforms will prove unsatisfying over time.

- **Is it scalable both in terms of design and affordability?**

Some platforms are adequate for smaller groups but become cumbersome as the group grows larger. And some platforms charge more money as the user base grows. Make sure, if you use one of those systems, that you are prepared to pay higher rates if your community becomes popular.

- **Is it stable enough that it will last into the future?**

Companies and platforms come and go. Open source projects are especially prone to instability. But many have lasted long enough that you can trust them enough to commit to them.

- **If you have to change platforms is your data transportable?**

In the event that you do want to change platforms, you want your data to be ported to the new platform without an unreasonable amount of trouble. Otherwise time and expense compound and some of the data will be lost in the process.

- **Can you handle your own technical support or can you easily get it?**

If you have competent technical staff, or have ready access to it, discuss with them your plans to make sure that you can quickly get the technical support you will need when things inevitably go wrong. Without it, you could lose people who might have otherwise stayed involved.

- **Does it easily allow live links, photos and other media?**

These days it isn't enough to just have text. Live links, photos, audio and video allow people to bring more life into their conversations. But visual and audio media files take up more data space. Be sure that if you allow media uploads, that you have enough space to store the media, as well as adequate protection against uploaded files that are embedded with "malware." At a minimum, your editor should allow the <embed> tag so media hosted on other sites can seamlessly display on your service.

People

- **Do you start with a core group or do you start with zero?**

You are at an advantage in the early days if you already have a core group who regularly participate and contribute to the conversations. It is even better if you enlist some or all of them to act as hosts for specific topic areas. If you don't already have such a group, see if some of your new members are good candidates to serve in a host role. Besides providing a larger variety of viewpoints than you and a small staff could provide by yourselves, they create a necessary social atmosphere that is crucial to attracting new people.

- **Do you have space for both personal and professional engagement?**

Many online community spaces are strongly oriented to particular interest areas such as specific professions or hobbies. But you cannot predict what will cause any two or more people to take their interactions to a deeper level. By providing areas where people can talk about their work and their hobbies as well as all other aspects

of their lives, you greatly increase your chances for growing the set of more deeply bonded relationships needed to propel your service into a genuine community.

- **Do you expect geographic proximity so people can meet easily in person?**

If an online community is all about relationships, then anything that helps grow and deepen those relationships help bind together your community. When people are in adequate physical proximity, it accelerates relationship building to have in-person gatherings, meetings, events and parties. It should be obviously beneficial to the people who attend. But it is also beneficial to everyone who uses your service, even if they do not, or cannot, attend in-person gatherings. They will still benefit from the increased bonding that occurs in-person.

- **Do you have space for both public and private interaction?**

Again, to foster strong relationship building among the people who use your service, you want to give them as many ways to connect with each other as you realistically can. Being able to quickly move from a public to a private conversation provides yet another strong way to accelerate relationship building.

- **Do you allow anonymity, consistent ID or real name?**

This is a tricky but important issue, and one you should decide before you start because you will have a hard time changing it later. If you require people to use their real names you make it easier for people to make personal and professional connections, especially because there are so many ways to find references for people around the Internet. But you also make it easier for one person to stalk another. If you allow complete anonymity or allow someone to change their login name, then you increase the likelihood that some will impersonate others or play roles as if they were in costume. A third way is to allow real names if someone wants it, while requiring that someone maintain a consistent login name throughout their use of your service.

Management

- **Do you have enough time, resources and commitment to do the work?**

An online service has to operate twenty-four hours a day, seven day a week. Any amount of time not available to the users is a problem for someone, which means it is a problem for you. Similar to a radio or television station, there is a chain of technology and people that all must work together for the service to be fully available. This means it can go down at any time, and you and your colleagues will need to get it working as soon as possible. Even when everything works fine for long stretches of time, you will find that this work is difficult to do well with a “nine to five” approach. And it is almost certain that you will become so engaged with the work and the people that you won’t want to put traditional worktime boundaries on it anyway.

- **Do you have the right personality for the work?**

Or if someone besides you manages it, do they? This work isn’t for everyone. The work requires almost nonstop engagement with a variety of people, and you will both lead and serve them. For a real community to develop, your engagement means both managing and participating. If the system is to become important to the lives of the people who use it, they will want management they trust. So you have to be genuine, interested, responsive, fair, competent, informative, welcoming and

open minded. An online community is a collective journey taken by all the participants and you too will be on it. Good things await down the road, but make sure you are ready and eager to undertake it.

•Are you prepared for a special kind of leadership?

Online community management is unusual work because most of the communicating is just with words via networked computing. Nevertheless, those words can add up over time to a collective entity that has recognizable atmosphere and tone that makes the people want to consistently spend their time there. When this atmosphere is evident enough that participants consistently remark about it, you have a good indicator that you are on your way to real community.

As the manager, you should personify the tone that you wish to see as a baseline for the community. To do this you want your online self to be close as possible to who you are in person. You want other people to experience you as you really are. But since you only have words and maybe pictures, you can't be too casual about how to accomplish it. It is not unlike writing where you want your work to be as if you were speaking naturally, when in fact you carefully craft your words to make it seem like you are spontaneously communicating.

In order to get your online self to come as close as you can to who you are the rest of the time, you have to compensate for the loss of what you can't communicate beyond words. There is deliberate projection involved. Before you write something, consider the personality and tone you put forward along with the informational content of the words. In this way you model the behavior you want to see in others. A big part of that behavior is being open to other views and attitudes, including those that you do not agree with personally.

The online environment is restricted to words and sometimes pictures and video, but still something comes through along with that. There is an emotional subcarrier going out concurrent with the words. And even when you just have words to communicate, that emotion goes out there with the words and they will be received and interpreted by people using their own mixture of rational and emotional. Never forget this reality. It will serve you well.

With leadership come authority. Most social structures have a form of authority chain. Most online systems are managed by a system's owners. With authority comes responsibility. Demonstrating responsibility creates trust. *Authority* is earned, recognized by others and endorsed by the people. *Authoritarian* is imposing rules and structures more for the sake of reinforcing that authority than for constructively moving forward. The danger of drifting into an authoritarian stance is that you can become more likely to make decisions without thinking through the consequences and you can become reluctant to admit when you have made a mistake. If so then people may think of you as on a "power trip" which creates a chilling effect.

Over time by acting and communicating in a genuine and open minded manner, you become someone everybody trusts. Ultimately trust is the basis for everything functioning. Without it everything falls apart or never gets off the ground. Trust is

often given up front as a kind of credit extended to another person, but long term it has to be earned through your actions every day.

Sometimes you are not correct and someone may point it out to you, either privately or in public. Admitting your mistakes and striving not to repeat them actually builds more of the trust that you need to do your work.

• **Are you prepared to wear many different hats in the course of the work?**

If you actively host an online scene, large or small, whether you operate the system or not, you will have to switch between a number of roles, and you can't always predict at what time you will need to fulfill which role. A person can't really "multitask" in real time because you can only really pay attention to one thing at a time. Rather the brain does a lot of switching back and forth, sometimes very quickly. When you "wear a lot of hats" you have to become very good at this kind of switching because every one of the tasks you have to perform is important. This constant switching can be frustrating. But it comes with the territory. As the old saying goes, "the devil is in the details." Those of us involved in visionary work sometimes tend to not want to do administrative tasks that we might regard as boring. But not doing any one of them, and doing them well, can create problems that take much time and attention to straighten out and can even put your whole project in danger of failure.

Here are some of the hats you will wear:

Leader: an online community is dedicated to bringing people together and giving all a place to talk, meet and collaborate, but they are not democracies. They are owned by a company or an organization and someone is responsible for it. When you are an online community manager you are either that responsible person or you represent the people who are. That gives you the responsibilities of leadership.

Participant: at the same time, you actively participate in the conversations and the process of getting to know the people just like everyone else, even as you maintain your leader status. It seems like a paradox to be both leader and peer, but that is what you do. Because even while participating like everyone else, if you do it well, you still lead the group toward better understanding and overall value in using the service.

Moderator: includes setting up topics and conversations and helping along ones that others create, including interviews and other "set" pieces.

Mediator: Arguments happen. Usually they work themselves through without you needing to get in the middle to calm everyone down or sometimes put a stop to something that escalates out of control. But when you need to intervene, do so without expressing emotion of your own.

Helpdesk: no matter how easy your system is to use and understand, there will be people who don't know how to find or do something. You need to help them and promptly. Otherwise they might go away and not come back. Helping also means

greeting new people, taking an interest in them, and helping them find the people and conversations that bring them the most value.

Librarian: related to helpdesk, you need to know where things are so you can either help someone find something directly, or more commonly, participate in a conversation and actively link to related material either inside your own system or elsewhere on the net. Other people can and often do this on their own, and you won't have all the answers or relevant ideas anyway, but the point is to stay mindful of opportunities to illuminate a conversation or comment with a good reference.

Analyst: how many people do you have and how many of them actively participate? How often do they come and how long do they stay? What are the connectors between the people? What topics are of most and least interest? You need to know these and other vital signs as a measure of your community's health. And you need to weave them into the story you tell to anyone who might support or fund your efforts.

Janitor: there is a certain amount of necessary housekeeping required including clear arrangement of content, staying current with signups, registrations and other user needs, and details related to other activities such as offline events.

Convenor: a relationship-based approach means taking advantage of a variety of methods for bringing people closer together. Some are basic like greeting new people with a welcome message and follow-ups and helping people with references and links both in private and public conversations. Taking it a step further, you can arrange, via other platforms, group voice and video calls, webinars, and a variety of face-to-face gatherings.

• **What rules will you have?**

The rule of either real name or anonymity was discussed above. Another is whether you allow any copyrighted material to be displayed on your service. Still another sets limits on certain kinds of human behavior. Typically online communities allow spirited debate that often gets contentious. One good rule is disallowing "ad hominem" remarks that involve name-calling and even a form of slander.

However, people generally do not like too many rules imposed on them by management. In particular is a common aversion to what some could perceive as a form of censorship. In addition, allowing various comments while disallowing others puts you in a position of making qualitative judgements, for which you may be held responsible. Consider carefully before removing something from public view.

• **Are you prepared to handle conflicts?**

In all parts of life, conflict is easy to get into and hard to resolve. This is especially true in the online or virtual world where it is made more difficult by the constraints of the medium. We're all just so calibrated to *misunderstand* each other.

As much as we all want happy productive lives in community with others, negativity and conflict are inevitable. It is part of the human condition. However, it does not

have to dominate any group or person. It isn't healthy to suppress unexamined feelings, ideas, or issues when they are negative, unpleasant or inconvenient. The idea is to get objective enough about something negative so you don't spread it thoughtlessly, or in a way that makes someone else feel worse if it isn't helpful. It doesn't mean gloss it over or be fake happy. It means trying to separate what you want to say from the emotion that might be driving you to say it. It's hard enough to have a truthful discussion about difficult issues between people without making it worse by projecting the full load of whatever negative feelings you have. Part of mindfulness is recognizing when you are in a negative frame of mind and not letting it go too far.

But what about when someone else is being negative, or when they react to your negativity in an equal or greater negative way. What do you do to straighten it out? First, try to separate the informational content of what someone is saying from the emotion of it. They might be saying something valuable. Then it becomes more effective to ask someone to tone it down. Unless they are screaming at you. At those times when the ratio of "signal to noise" is way too far on the noise end of the scale, it is probably best to get things calmed down first before you dig into what is really going on.

Remember, you don't have to solve every argument. At the same time, you are not the "Nice Police" going around reminding everyone how cordial or polite they need to be. That becomes off-putting to others and ultimately can disrespect others' abilities to work their way through their own heated discussions.

Now here is the good news. Conflicts can strengthen bonds as well as weaken them. Relationships - individual and group - gain their temper like steel when you know that you can resolve, or at least live with, your disagreements. Knowing that you can - because you have - makes relationships stronger.

Neither seek, nor avoid. Don't be afraid of conflict if you have to go there. But do not seek it for any reason other than to gain mutual understanding.

Ultimately the best approach for all in smoothing out conflicts is when the participants *oversupply* understanding. This is one of the best ways for anyone, and especially online managers, to lead by example. It is the art of listening. And it means being diplomatic. I was once told by a diplomat at the United Nations that the essence of being a diplomat is this: if you are one of ten people at a table it means you talk 10% of the time and the other 90% you listen.

• How will you make your service a safe place for your people?

The amazing thing about good online spaces is that they have atmosphere, tone, and an almost tangible feel to them. While it is true that you can't physically hurt someone online, people can and do feel hurt by what others say. There are online spaces where women in particular don't feel particularly safe. In such cases perception should usually be taken as reality. Unless you don't want both genders to participate equally, it is critical to pay close attention to helping those who may be intimidated feel safe to express themselves.

Watch out for harrassment, threats and stalking. The matrix of an online community is the human attention paid to it by the participants. Some people lack attention from others in their everyday life and can receive it as part of an online community. But when the attention and energy in a group grows, some people come along just to “take a bite out of it” and that can take forms that create an unpleasant experience for others. One good tool for people who want to direct their attention elsewhere is the ability to block or not see the comments and messages of a given person. This helps you as a manager because it lowers your involvement in the details of the dispute.

Even with that, as manager, at times you have to take action - it's a fact of life. You may need to remove someone completely from the system and even try to bar him or her from returning. Booting rarely happens quietly, so be prepared to explain if you choose to do it. Sometimes people come back and work within the social framework and some come back for revenge. Be prepared for all of it.

Externals

• Do you know the laws in your country so you stay in compliance?

Different nations and states have differing rules regarding what is and is not allowed. There are two main areas of compliance: the data a system gathers in the course of administering and managing an online service and what is said by people who use the service.

In 2018 a new law in the European Union called the General Data Protection Regulations, goes into effect regarding gathering, storing and sharing the data about users such as their names, addresses, email address and other personal information including photos as well as the content of whatever they post. This law will apply to all who operate in the EU, even if the server is somewhere else. The new rules give individuals greater rights and more control over how their personal data can be used by a company. You will need to understand and comply with this law if you wish to have a presence in any EU country.

Other countries regulate what people can and cannot say, especially with political and national security subjects. Even if you as the manager are not at risk because your company and server operates outside their jurisdiction, be aware that some states conduct surveillance or monitoring of peoples' comments and may act upon an individual for what they have said. This has implications as to how much anonymity you allow.

•Can you protect your users from hacking and malware?

Hacking happens everywhere now in all corners of the Internet and at all times. Protection is always a matter of degree and there is no ultimate, “bullet proof” protection. Creating and maintaining the appropriate level of protection for your service must be factored into “the cost of doing business.” Hacking happens in many forms. Sometimes it is in the form of a prank, such as posting pornography on your site in full public view, or of a more serious nature such as introducing viruses, a “denial of service” or when someone uses your site to store illegal data or to steal personal information. Any of these create serious problems when it happens to you, especially if you do not have quick access to good technical help to get rid of the

problem and preventing it from happening again. Part of a protection plan is making frequent and complete backups of your service.

Another form of intrusion is the introduction of “malware” that is embedded unseen in a file such as a photo, audio or video file that another person then downloads. Malware, short for malicious software, comes in a variety of forms including viruses, trojan horses, spyware, keyloggers, ransomware and others. If your server houses media files shared between users, you may unwittingly be hosting malware. Know how to find it and remove it. Some services do not store media files for their members and only allow links to external sites or embedding, which is a media file from another site that displays on your own service as a convenience to your users.

- **Does your messaging system coordinate with your regular email address?**

Email is common now to most everyone who uses the Internet. Some people have multiple email addresses, but many do not and do not want more than the one they have. Your system may have internal messaging capabilities, but such functionality is vastly more powerful and useful when it passes seamlessly to existing email addresses. Offering this means you store those addresses for your users, which requires greater vigilance in protecting that data, even if people do not actually see the other person’s email address on your service.