Building Thriving Online Communities
Program Development Team
August 22, 2013 (Meeting #3)
Meeting Summary

What conditions allow disparate individuals to gracefully become a true growing community?

In the third meeting of Creating the Future's "Building Strong Online Communities" working team, we moved from the theoretical to the practical – roles and structures that support thriving communities. And while the subject at hand was online communities (aimed immediately at Creating the Future's twitter chat and Facebook group, and then growing outward from there), the truth we are finding is that community is community, because people are people.

You can watch the entire meeting itself by clicking on this link.

Present at the meeting were:
  Hildy Gottlieb and Dimitri Petropolis - Creating the Future co-founders
  Nancy Iannone - facilitator of Creating the Future's #NPCons chat for consultants
  Marlene Oliveira - facilitator #NPMC chat
  Marc Pitman - facilitator of Creating the Future's Facebook group for consultants

The group used the summary from Meeting #2 as the basis for moving forward. For every major pre-condition for success noted in that summary - shared expectations, modeling / being the community we want to see, facilitated engagement and invitation, and the space to explore - we asked the same questions:
  • What would it take for people to... (share expectations, model "community," etc.)
  • What roles / functions / structures would support / create / maintain those conditions?

A Note About Functions vs. Budget line item
Unlike many program development discussions, this one was not aimed at budget line items, but was aimed instead at defining broad functions that could be accomplished through a variety of means.

That is how we humans think naturally. We don't think in terms of budgets, we think in terms of what needs to get done. Breaking down a project or program function by function allows us to see the rich map of what it really takes to accomplish goals. In that way, people can step in to participate / help in ways that resonate for them, building cooperation and joint responsibility for making the whole effort work.

And if the program we are building is the development of thriving online communities, it seems only logical to build cooperation and joint responsibility for success into every aspect of that work - including the initial discussions for how we will accomplish that!

The Power of Facilitated Engagement and Invitation

Roles / Functions:

• Greeter - someone(s) to say hello and welcome people as they join, and as they re-enter the "room."

• Re-inviter
- someone has participated before, and has fallen off - bringing them back in
- reviewing prior chats / conversations for who was quiet - who was present showing interest, not lurking, but not super active. "If they just lurk, there's no way to find them. But if they introduce themselves at the start, we know they are present."
- In the FB group, if they ask to join and are then quiet - the need for an active role to re-engage them.

• Identifier for re-inviting
- reviewing chats / discussions to see who is standing out, in order to re-invite them!

• Conversation engager
- In the Facebook group
- Engage specifically - so people can see themselves in the questions
    - What would be helpful for fundraising people? What would be helpful for board people?

• Archivist / Curation:
- Highlight good conversation, bring people in
- In Twitter chats, archiving the chat at the site.
- In Facebook group, once a week, collect discussions from the week. Create digest, post somewhere (list of topics posted at Creating the Future's FB page - link to group, if consultants they can join, if not we can engage conversation at the FB page itself...) to entice current members to re-look, to entice people to become group members, to re-entice those whom we want to re-invite to participate. Like an aggregator of news headlines.
- Cross platform / cross pollination - invite / announce for people to look at the archive (schedule tweets to be a regular feature - get above the noise - perhaps every Wednesday X gets posted. Or start a meme of #FundraisingWednesday or etc.)
- One role = pull the info together (archival data posted)
- One role = inviting people to that info (cross platform)

• Validator - retweeting / liking

• Facebook-specific: Connector
 - someone in charge of contacting every single person in the group, to welcome them, to share the About section
    - In the weeds discussion: Facebook does not allow a group administrator to email everyone in the group. FB also does not allow an entity (like Creating the Future) to belong to a group - it must be a person. We need to find a way to systematize (vs reliance on a person) the ability to connect with every person in the group (perhaps sign up at FB as a person, using the name CTFuture Consultant Group Admin), giving all the group's facilitators access to that account, for the purpose of being that connector. (If it were just one person who took on that role, and that person got busy or was no longer interested, they would have 300 friends related just to the group, and we'd have no institutional way to connect with the group members)
- Somehow (tech challenges aside) be able to immediately and directly connect across Facebook with every single person individually in the group

The Power of Modeling

Before focusing on how one puts "modeling" into practice as a role or structure, the group discussed what modeling means. From that discussion, they focused on the question, "How can we be explicit about what it takes to model intentionality?" (And if you think that's a brain-bender, you are correct!)

• Teaching by doing it
  - Teaching is a generous thing - the more explicit we can be about what happens to make the community a special place, the more our mission is accomplished
• Teaching - the Learning Lab
  - Because Creating the Future is a learning laboratory, with a mission to learn and teach and demonstrate approaches that bring out the best in each other, it is important that we find ways to be explicit about what it takes to create communities where people feel so engaged. People talk about the fact that this is a group they feel safe in, come back to. Being a learning and teaching lab means letting people know what that takes!
      - A post in the chats, at the blogs for the chats, a post in the About at the FB page
• "Am I being intentional, or am I being squeezed through the toothpaste tube of life?" ~ Marc
• The power of self-reflection (and reflection in general)
  - Taking a celebratory approach to reflection - not "how did I fail" but celebrating successes
  - Looking in the mirror for pimples vs. looking at "God created my face!"
• How do we be explicit about the things we are being intentional about, either by practice or by nature?
  - Jane's note in the summary of Meeting #2 about "Modeling is about being conscious."
• What does it take to turn intention into systematizable functions?
  - State it out loud, put it in writing. Get it out of our heads and post it.
  - Post the "why" - how this fits into Creating the Future's mission
  - Re-post the "rules" - the "About" - the why we're here, what the tone is, what's expected
  - Infuse intentionality into every other function - the Monday greeting, the brag basket, into parts of the Twitter chat
  - "In honoring our intentionality, the brag basket does X." Insert it in just a few words, "as it says in the About..."
  - How all this fits into Creating the Future's mission!
  - Make the "About" a living document - link back, to create context and infusing it all tomorrow. "This is how we be."
  - Send new people a message that brings them to the About page
• An assumption of good - we assume the person joining the group has value
• "The brag basket encourages us to share and celebrate, which reminds me how this group is benefiting me!" ~ Marlene
• Being explicit about the benefits of sharing at every stage of practice. For people who are in the "If only I had more clients" stage, it is helpful to know there is benefit in sharing - that I receive as I share. If our language (chats and group) can infuse nuance of meeting people where they are, then it shares that the benefit is what people at every point along the continuum are seeking.
  - When people share, I feel like it's an abundant world. When people are selfish, I feel scarcity. When people share, I feel potential.

The Power of Modeling *(continued)*
Roles / Structures:
• About page
   - 1 page welcoming
   - Several other pages / files that note details
     - Here's our rules, and here's why (allowing for clear intentionality in each sub-page)
       - Here's why
       - Here's the kind of culture we're trying to create
• Greeting -
   - Modeling the intentionality in the greeting, and being explicit about what we're doing
• Conversation starter -
   - Someone who intentionally sparks conversations about "what will it take" - What creates safe space? What creates trust? Etc.
• Modeling celebration
   a) asking people to celebrate (the Brag Basket) and
   b) being explicit about our being intentional about it.
   - Whatever you want to celebrate, personal or professional

Reflections:
Jane	The power of making intentionality explicit.
Mark	The power of functions vs. budget items, which leads to intentionality
Marlene	The power of process and systems vs. people to make things sustainable
Nancy	The power of making intentionality explicit - and what that looks like
	- Difference between systems across platforms
	- But the intentionality is the same
Dimitri	The power of being a teaching demonstration, and modeling
Hildy	The power of turning the seemingly ethereal into practical things we can do, through the questions we ask: "How do we make intentionality explicit?"

At our next meeting, we will continue the discussion of roles and functions that support thriving online communities - the power of Setting Expectations, and the power of creating and maintaining a place of exploration.