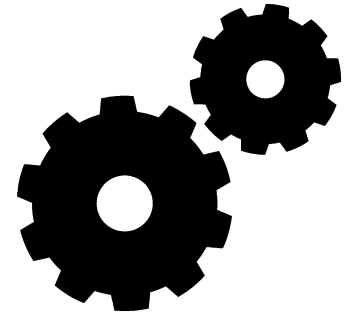


Disputes, Flame Wars and Trolls - Managing Conflict in Community



HIGHLIGHTS

- Community managers are in a position to raise awareness and set the tone for acceptable online behavior. This will require the implementation of rules of engagement that are enforced when violated.
- Anonymity is not necessary in most communities. Allowing member anonymity provides more of an opportunity for inappropriate behavior.
- Community managers should receive conflict resolution training as part of their skill set. This will provide a framework from which to operate and understand human behavior.

SPEAKERS

Andrea Weckerle,
Civilination

COMPETENCIES

Community
Management,
Policies and
Governance

MATURITY PHASES

CMM1, CMM2, CMM3,
CMM4

OVERVIEW

Andrea is an attorney licensed to practice law in Washington, DC and New Jersey. She went into management consulting for Ernst and Young in their legal management services area.

In this role, she assisted Fortune 500 companies with the set up their ADR (Alternative Dispute Resolution) systems, as well as ADR training. She also has experience as a moderator at the community level and has been engaged online as a participant, a blogger and as a global citizen for several years.

It quickly became apparent to Andrea that there was a sub-set of people whose agenda was simply to wreak havoc for sport, to pursue their own agenda or to just spread hate online. The result is that innocent people without that same agenda would easily be caught off-guard.

In Andrea's view, with more and more people being online in social networking sites, the number of incidences of people showing inappropriate online behavior has increased because there is more opportunity for people to engage socially.



Andrea Weckerle, Founder
and President

[Learn more about Andrea](#)

OVERVIEW

Andrea felt very strongly even several years ago that we really need to start defining the type of online culture that we want, particularly with the goal of protecting the ability for everyone to have a voice online. The inappropriate behavior that exists to strong-arm others with opposing voices goes against the right to freedom of speech. Accordingly she, along with Jimmy Wales, has founded an organization called [Civilination](#) with the purpose of promoting civility online.

There should be some norms introduced outlining what is appropriate and what is inappropriate behavior. The range of that will sway, of course, depending on which group you are talking to and the purpose of the communication. However, there will probably be some agreed upon terms for inappropriateness, such as death threats, posting personal information about your family, actions that fall into the legal realm, etc.

[Civilination](#)'s mission statement is as follows:

“Our mission is to foster an online culture where every person can freely participate in a democratic, open, rational and truth-based exchange of ideas and information, without fear or threat of being the target of unwarranted abuse, harassment, or lies.”

The screenshot shows the Civilination website homepage. At the top left is the Civilination logo, which consists of a globe icon and the word "CIVILINATION" in blue and green. To the right of the logo is a search bar with the placeholder text "Search...". Below the logo and search bar is a navigation menu with the following items: Home, About, CivilNation Academy, Resource Center, News, and Contact. The main content area features a large banner image of a computer keyboard with the text "Taking a stand against online harassment, character assassination, and violence." overlaid in white. Below the banner is a section with the text: "CivilNation's goal is to advance the full capability of individuals to communicate and engage in cyberspace in an open, responsible, and accountable way." Below this text is a smaller line of text: "We believe that by fostering an online culture in which individuals can fully engage and contribute without fear of being the target of unwarranted abuse, harassment, or lies." To the right of this text is a blue sidebar with the heading "Sign up for our newsletter:" and a form with an "Email" input field and a green "Sign up" button.

OVERVIEW

Andrea explained that, unfortunately, we are not starting from scratch with a pristine online environment, which would make it easier to set the tone. Instead, we currently have an environment that is, to a certain degree, problematic. Some pockets are bad and some pockets are good. Andrea believes that community managers are at the forefront of being able to model behavior and set the tone.

The norms have evolved over time. They are fluid norms, i.e. the rules of engagement are those that are decided by the members as they proceed forward. As a result, there will be different levels of what is acceptable behavior and, conversely, what is unacceptable behavior.

BEST PRACTICES

The following is a summary of the various best practices that emerged from the discussion with members:

- Andrea advised that as a community manager, it is imperative that he/she establish rules with enforceable consequences for violation. Let members know that breaking the rules will result in severe consequences. For example, death threats or anything that falls under the legal arena. Any type of behavior that falls into those categories will result in automatic membership termination and/or being turned over to legal authorities.
- Andrea suggested forming a voting committee within the community to decide on the consequences for inappropriate member behavior. One member concurred with this best practice stating that they employ an anonymous “resident advisory board” for the more serious violations, particularly if the consequence is to terminate a membership. This member explained that it needs to be an anonymous committee or people will not participate. For this community, the procedure is to more or less randomly choose 25 people for the advisory board. This is a random selection of members in good standing.
- If a member has ever been reprimanded or suspended in the past, the system does not include their name in the pool. A new committee is formed each time a decision needs to be made. The management lays out the case regarding the violation (without naming any names) and asks for a “yes” or “no” vote.
- Rachel Happe liked this best practice because it does not call for one person to be a judge. There is more objectivity involved in the decision and includes voices from the community.

BEST PRACTICES

- Andrea explained that in most communities, anonymity is not necessary. Where it is essential (whistle blowers, political repression, etc.), it should be an option. But, in most situations, it just offers a veil for bad behavior to hide behind.
- Andrea strongly believes that community managers should be given ADR training. ADR training will help him/her know how to react to various situations, how to facilitate a dispute between particular members, when to let things go and when to take action.
- Recognize that some comments are intended to incite. The hardest thing to do in this type of situation is not respond. A reaction is what the perpetrator is looking for and knowing when not to respond will diffuse a situation much more quickly and/or prevent escalation. That being said, there are situations which do require a response and the situation should be nipped in the bud. This is why Andrea strongly believes that ADR training is a necessity for community managers. It helps him/her to formulate a framework from which to operate and understand human behavior.
- One participant explained that a best practice employed in her previous community was to actually call the individual who was exhibiting the inappropriate behavior. This worked like a charm because people were actually surprised that someone was monitoring the community to that extent.
- Andrea shared that in her opinion, unless something is on a Government site, she has no difficulty deleting or moderating comments or altering specific portions of comments. She was clear to make a distinction that this is when the comments are an attack (an attack that could have severe repercussions to someone's reputation, the revealing of personal information and/or an attack that inhibits the individual's ability to remain gainfully employed), not just negative or critical comments. If the goal is to damage someone or an entity, that has no constructive purpose. It is not an improvement. The purpose is simply to wreak havoc. Of course, someone will call that censorship and an infringement of freedom of speech. However, if it is a private entity, anything can be done and the rules of that community need to be honored to remain an active member. Often, when community members see that something is not allowed to move forward and that action has been taken, they start towing the line a little better.

BEST PRACTICES

- One participant offered that in her experience, sometimes a situation can easily be diffused by responding to the individual calmly and rationally. Ask why they are frustrated. Gently probe further without inflaming them; remain neutral. Generally, the person just wants to be heard and recognized. Ask how you can be of assistance.
- In a community's rules of engagement, it would be well advised to add something that states that an individual may not disclose private facts pertaining to other individuals and/or not knowingly spread false rumors. Andrea recommends that examples should be included so that members can see what is expected of them vs. just general language.
- Another member shared that they had success with something that they called: "The Big 6." These were six behaviors that members were not allowed to use within the community. The community was very specific about the repercussions should anyone violate any of those six guidelines.
- Rachel Happe suggested using a war gaming scenario before contentious responses are made public. Run the response by those individuals who have a lighter touch with the specifics of wording to get the message across in a kind way that engages the individual positively. Andrea offered that most people are rational people; they just want to be recognized. It does not mean you agree with their position, but you are giving them the respect of listening. By providing the individual with the ability to express their viewpoints in a civil manner, it often diffuses the situation.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Rachel Happe played devil's advocate by noting that we are trying to clean up behavior online, but society offline has gone off the tracks with respect to appropriate social behavior. Andrea responded that although this is true, she is encouraged by her readings in this field that suggest more and more people are concerned by the degree to which social discourse has gone down the drain. This is timely because there is no longer a strong demarcation line between the online and the offline world. Nevertheless, certain rules of engagement are unique to the online environment. It is imperative that we begin implementing some sort of structure because even though the Internet has been around for a couple of decades, we have never really defined an appropriate culture for it.
- Rachel Happe then asked what we can do to help engender these rules of engagement. Andrea replied that the first step is to raise awareness. Community managers are in an excellent position to create that awareness. If we can agree that our goal is to exchange information, to have freedom of speech, to advance positive social goals, then the attacking behavior that exists online must cease. This goes beyond simply insulting someone; we are talking about concerted, intentional damage that is inflicted upon another person. That kind of behavior simply cannot be tolerated. It cannot ostensibly hide behind an individual's right to freedom of speech. Unfortunately, the law has not kept pace with what has been happening online.
- Participants discussed some of their experiences with online behavior. Resoundingly, participants felt that online anonymity does more harm than good. One participant further stated that when her new platform comes in, anonymity will not be permitted as an option. The main reason behind this train of thought is that with anonymity, people feel that they can act without punishment. Cloaked in anonymity, people say and act much more brazenly and rudely than they would face-to-face or with their identity known.

LESSONS LEARNED

- In any situation where people are involved, there will be those that simply do not like each other (even online). It is unfortunate because that lack of face-to-face contact means that conflict can escalate to even greater degrees much more quickly. The community manager has a difficult task at hand because it does not necessarily involve the company or the brand, but personal attacks between community members. The main lesson to realize with this type of behavior is that these individuals are drawn to the attention they are garnering from others in the community and the staff. Bad apples draw attention to themselves on purpose because they thrive off of that attention.
- Along the lines of the above, Andrea explained that conflict is not necessarily negative. The dispute can demonstrate that people are very engaged in a particular environment or a particular issue. It is only when the dispute reaches a particular level that somebody needs to step in to resolve it. Furthermore, members of a community need to be trained as to when to ignore a dispute between two parties and when it is appropriate to engage in the dispute. Oftentimes, well-meaning friends or supporters of somebody who is being attacked start engaging, but they do it in a very counter-productive way. The result is two warring parties instead of two warring people.
- In the experience of the members who work in professional communities, the behavior generally remains professional. The wanton behavior is more frequent in the communities that are open to the public.
- Rachel Happe shared that one community manager she knows had a different definition of ROI, which was “Return on Ignorance.” In other words, if the community manager ignores certain types of behavior, others will shut it down. It comes down to a judgment call. Jim added in the chat that: “A true troll is in it for the fight”, meaning that the individual is looking for a reaction. Do not give him/her the satisfaction of reacting.

LESSONS LEARNED

- One participant explained that each community is different, particularly the communities whose purpose it is to make money. It is more difficult for the staff of a money-making community because disrupters enjoying participating in the community just to attack (even if they were not necessarily customers). For this participant, she made sure that she stood strong for her staff. Her motto was: “You can attack the company and what we are doing, but not our employees.” When someone attacked an employee, this is where she drew the line of intolerance.
- Members shared that it is easy to put consequences in place for the violation of rules. However, the challenge lies in trying to decide upon the degree of offensiveness and/or how badly the rule was breached. Do you really want to kick somebody out? Do you want to have a three strikes rule? Do you want to give them a second chance? How bad does it have to be to take action? The best practice above re: implementing a voting committee could be used in this instance.
- Andrea explained that some people may be functioning in society, but they are pathological. She advises people to use caution when sharing personal information, particularly with geo-location apps.
- One member shared that she had a community manager who did not believe that email had a tone. The fact that she could not see that is the reason she is no longer in that role. She was trying to do the right thing by encouraging people to think before they typed, but in the process was offending them terribly by the way she was expressing things. This lesson learned speaks to the best practice above re: having someone read over a response before making it public. There are ways to say the same thing, but in a way that people want to participate vs. becoming offended.

RESOURCES

- How to reach Andrea: <http://civilination.org/>
- Andrea's Twitter handle is <http://www.twitter.com/aweckerle>
- [twitter/civilination](#)
- As mentioned in the discussion:
<http://www.michellesblog.net/other-social-networks/why-i-cant-get-as-excited-about-geolocation-as-scoble>
- As mentioned by Jim Storer in the chat dialogue: a great analogy on trolls and how to deal with them (response on Twitter) -
<http://twitter.com/toxicmenges/status/11387301532>
- As mentioned in the chat dialogue: <http://mashable.com/2008/11/16/motrin-moms/>