

Managing Chaos: Creating Community/ Product Team Feedback Loops



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Curious about the types of chaos as defined by Jonathan?** In Jonathan's experience, there are 2 types of chaos. Jonathan explained his definitions and backed this up with both his experiences and the experiences of participants on the call.
- **Want to know how to create positive feedback loops?** Jonathan showcased 4 steps – punctuated with examples – that will help participants to implement positive feedback loops when dealing with member input.
- **Looking for some guiding principles for dealing with chaos?** Jonathan shared his lessons learned, lessons that he turned into 3 guiding principles.

SPEAKERS

Jonathan Wold
(WooCommerce) and
Kelly Schott (TheCR)

COMPETENCIES

Strategy

MATURITY PHASES

CMM1, CMM2, CMM3

OVERVIEW

- **Background Jonathan Wold.** Jonathan has been working in community off and on in different roles for 15 plus years. Most recently, he was the Head of Community for WooCommerce. He was responsible for their Meet-Ups Program for global spaces, Facebook groups, Slack, etc. They had an education program and Jonathan served as a general point of contact for the community. He was responsible for a great deal of advocacy work. In this role, Jonathan received significant input from many different places. Especially due to the nature of it, the input tended to be fairly high stakes. People were building their businesses on WooCommerce and, thus, cared deeply about what they were asking about and sharing. Consequently, there were times that it felt quite chaotic.
 - In this advocacy role, it was not just about listening, but also taking action on the input that came in to make sure that it got to the right people.

OVERVIEW

- As Jonathan spoke with Kelly about potential topics to cover, the ability to take action on input was the one topic that stood out the most. There are 2 facets to it. First there is the concept of managing chaos. In general, community is a role in which you deal with higher amounts of input than a normal job. That leads to unpredictability, ebbs and flows and copious amounts of information. In other words, chaos. The challenge is to take that and turn it into something useful. The other side of it is a way to create positive feedback loops. In the context of working with product teams, it's about taking the insights and feedback from the community and turning it into something that's actionable for these teams.



BEST PRACTICES

- ***Define chaos in order to manage it.*** Chaos is disorder and confusion. When Jonathan started his work at WooCommerce, he started off with a great deal of firefighting. He found himself jumping around from problem to problem. He thrives in that atmosphere. However, what he realized over time was that the fire was never extinguished. Since he recognized that that wasn't going to change, he used this as opportunity to adjust his approach.
 - At this point in the discussion, Jonathan asked for feedback from others in terms of the types of chaos that they deal with in their roles:
 - Product updates. Features are not pushed out fast enough, so members feel that they are not being heard.
 - When an event is organized and the plan is laid out for the day, chaos ensues when nothing goes according to the plan. Despite careful planning and forethought, it never seems to be enough when human interaction is involved.



BEST PRACTICES


- With an internal community, employees have so many tools that they have to use throughout the day. The community is just one of them. However, since they know someone is listening to them in the community, they complain about everything. It feels like an endless cycle of trying to help them find the right people to solve various problems.
- Another participant concurred. She deals with this, as well. Her solution is education. However, even with educating her members on how to find the answers to their problems, they still keep coming back to the community to do it for them. This takes up a lot of time.
 - Jonathan added here that when you think about the feedback loops, you have to find the aligned incentives between the teams that you communicate with and your member base. In some cases, you might have a passionate user base giving feedback, but the team that you are trying to give this feedback to doesn't really care. In Jonathan's experience, finding the aligned incentive helps to deal with this problem. Sometimes there isn't an obvious connection between the two and we have to get creative in order to make that connection.



BEST PRACTICES

- **Take a step back and assess how you spend your day.** It's very easy to stay busy in community work. There's always something to do. The question that Jonathan asks himself is: "Am I making progress? Am I getting things done? How do I know if I'm providing value?" Those are ongoing questions, but this is where positive feedback loops come into play. It's not just about products; the scope can be expanded. Creating positive feedback loops was, for Jonathan, a way of channeling the chaos. It helped him work through all the feedback.

1. Show & Tell: Time Management & Task Lists 2 | Like ↻

 [Kelly Schott](#)

Posted 02-26-2019 13:04 Reply -

Since we're right in the middle of the busy season and we all have a lot of tasks on our to-do lists, we've been having a lot of conversations around how we all stay organized and accountable. For professional reasons (and some personal reasons!), we'd love to see how you all stay organized with both the big picture and the day-to-day tasks.

For this Show & Tell, we'd love for you to share:

1. A screenshot of one week of your calendar (to show the range of tasks we're all working on)
2. How you keep track of your tasks or priorities for the week

Also, if you're using any tools that you really love, drop a note in your reply and let us know where we can find it!

<https://bit.ly/34Eaqgm>

BEST PRACTICES

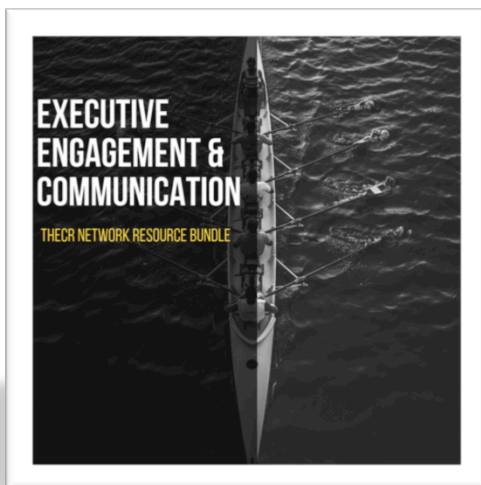
- **Create positive feedback loops.** In Jonathan's experience, there are 4 stages to a positive feedback loop.
 - ***Help the community to feel heard.*** Make sure that the community you serve feels heard. You won't always be able to solve member problems, but to feel heard and cared for can be even more important to them. In other instances you might very well be able to solve their problem, but it will take time.
 - One member shared that when she is able to do this for a community member, she notices that it completely dissolves any defensiveness. Personally communicating to an individual who thinks that they are talking into a black hole can do a tremendous amount of good. It's also very rewarding. Therefore, this participant makes it a point to communicate as transparently and as often as possible with members.
 - ***Deliver actionable insights.*** The second stage is to deliver actionable insights to your stakeholders. Learn how to take what you're hearing and pass it on in a way that's actionable. It's a developed skill to be able to translate the feedback from the community to, in Jonathan's case, the product team in a way that they will understand.
 - There are assumptions behind actionable feedback. First that the stakeholders want the feedback. Secondly, that you have a sense of what is useful to them and that you have an understanding – at least at a high level – of their goals and focus areas. That is the groundwork for being able to identify actionable feedback.
 - Be careful not to create a negative feedback loop, i.e. members feel heard by you, but then you just dump un-actionable feedback to the stakeholders and nothing gets done. Don't be a conduit for dumping the problem from one spot to another.

BEST PRACTICES

- ***Stakeholders taking action on the feedback.***

Unfortunately, this is a step in which you will have very little control. However, you have more influence than you recognize. You can't tell them what to do, but you can learn to influence them effectively. The starting point is to figure out what is important to these stakeholders.

- Try to be along for the ride. Jonathan found it helpful to be a useful presence to those stakeholders who are trying to get things done. He saw over time that his influence increased with the product team. They actually started to ask him for his input to help them know where to prioritize their work. That wasn't what he set out to do, but it helped him to recognize that there was more opportunity than he recognized at first to have an influence. This was accomplished by being present, by encouraging, by affirming and by building goodwill. He was pleasantly surprised that he could have an impact in an area where he didn't think it was possible.



<https://network.communityroundtable.com/browse/resource-bundles/executives>

BEST PRACTICES

- ***Show results to the community.*** This is the step that holds the magic. There are many prospects here to experiment with how to show progress publically. In community, there is plenty of opportunity to guide feelings. Communications/Public Relations can help you in this area.
 - You can have a big impact by showing results, even small results. Even just letting a member know that he/she was heard can help you to discover and develop champions within your community. The more you help them to feel heard, the more feedback they will deliver.
 - Publically call out and affirm any positive behavior to create a cycle to encourage more of it. Jonathan used announcement posts or videos, etc. He made a point of identifying the positive behaviors in the community and highlighting them. Experiment with how you present this positive behavior. It will help you to see more and more of that desired behavior. It will also demonstrate your ability to develop your power of influence.



LESSONS LEARNED

- Jonathan noticed that there were 2 types of chaos. First was event-driven chaos. This was driven by a specific incident, i.e. a PR-related issue, a product update, etc. So, a surge of activity around a particular event. Another form of chaos is an ongoing, steady deluge of events. Jonathan asked participants which type they dealt with most often and how they handled it:
 - For one participant, when she anticipates the event-driven chaos, she gives input to the product marketing team on their messaging. Marketing may have a general message that they want to release, but she'll let them know ahead of time if that message won't resonate with the community audience. She'll ask for it to be changed specifically for the community. For instance, in a few weeks they will release one of their most asked for product ideas. The fact that the community played a part in this highly anticipated release may not be in the general product message, but it's imperative that it's front and center for the community announcement.
 - Then there are issues that they don't have control over from a community standpoint. There are always people who don't get their update notifications or can't find the download. They post those questions all over the community and complain about how disorganized the company is, which means repeating the same instructions over and over again.

LESSONS LEARNED

- For another member, it could be general community unrest. For instance, they feel that they are not getting the frequency of updates needed, i.e. their expectations aren't met.
- For the types of chaos that Jonathan dealt with, he again categorized it into 2 parts. The firefighting is when something big hits and all hands are on deck to deal with it. In his 18 months at WooCommerce, Jonathan had small examples of this, but fortunately nothing big.
 - Jonathan took over the global Meet-Ups program just before Covid hit. Fortunately, since it was an e-commerce business, they had the benefit of a lot of positive goodwill. They were helping people make the necessary transitions brought about by Covid. They anticipated firefighting, but it didn't materialize the way they were prepared for it. Therefore, the biggest chaos challenge was the volume of input. There were messages from Facebook, emails, organizers, volunteers, etc., all with different requests. The general sense was that people didn't feel heard, likely because there hadn't been someone in the community position for a while. Jonathan's first instinct was basically chasing whoever was screaming the loudest. The problem with that approach is that it doesn't end. If you are just dealing with what's coming in, there is always going to be something else.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Jonathan recognized that this wasn't firefighting. This was consistent volume. That meant that there was an opportunity to change processes and approaches. The first step for Jonathan was to understand the expectations of stakeholders within the organization. What does success look like for these stakeholders? How does that compare to the definition of success for community members? In dealing with chaos, the first step is to learn the needs of those two groups.
- In Jonathan's experience, community tends to be an intersection. From an organizational perspective, you are tasked with taking care of the community, whether it's internal or external. Community tends to be under-resourced, but has high expectations to live up to – and the expectations are nebulous. Therefore, clearly define what success looks like to the stakeholders. For example, at WooCommerce, there was a process adherence component. When certain types of feedback came in – like a payment provider gaining access to the marketplace – there wasn't a process for dealing with it. These payment providers weren't getting a response from partnership, so they knocked on community's door. Jonathan worked with the partnership team to develop a process for dealing with these members. That helped the stakeholders. For community, the purpose of a feedback loop is so that members feel heard. It didn't mean that the problem was solved, but the member did feel heard.



LESSONS LEARNED

- Jonathan cautioned members not to commit to anything when creating their positive feedback loop, especially in the first step of helping members to feel heard. Only commit to what is within your control, such as the ability to follow up. Even that alone can help to create goodwill with members.
- Jonathan has found it useful to reach out to his various stakeholders and simply ask them what type of feedback is useful to them. He did that several times and found it extremely valuable. For instance, the design team asked for feedback around various interfaces that were being developed. That led to an opportunity to put together a focus group that was interested and motivated to give that feedback. Community has the ability to construct the feedback loops and find out ways to deliver what these stakeholders are looking for while also building goodwill. Sometimes you will have to deal with negative feedback. However, if members generally feel that their feedback is useful and actionable, when the stickier issues arise you can lean on the goodwill you have established.



LESSONS LEARNED

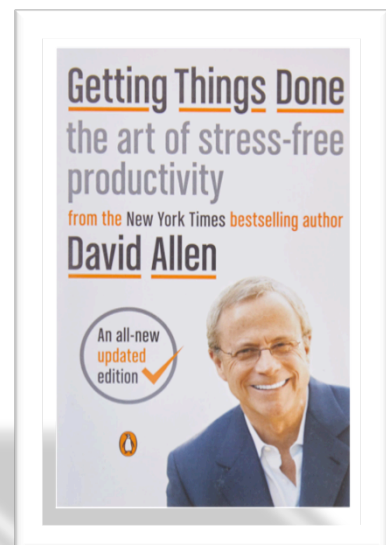
- One participant shared that in her community, a member was able to complete a project based on the help he received from the community. He posted this to the community and thanked everyone for their help. This was a great opportunity to highlight the value of community, both to the community and her leadership.
 - Jonathan added that community managers can make this a best practice. He has learned that by reaching out to members to ask if their questions were answered can help with both positive and negative feedback loops. Sometimes, the member resolved his/her problem, but didn't communicate that back to the membership. That's a great opportunity to highlight resolutions to both the community and senior leadership. Even if a problem wasn't resolved, it's still an opportunity because now you can do something to fix it. If you don't reach out, you'll never know.



LESSONS LEARNED

- Jonathan concluded with some guiding principles that he has learned when dealing with chaos:
 - Most communities are understaffed relative to the amount of what they have to deal with; there just aren't enough hours in the day to stay on top of everything. For Jonathan, he has learned to develop sustainable processes for dealing with the inputs. What has worked most effectively for him is to take at least an hour a day to process the input, but not necessarily respond to it. He recommends a book called: *"Getting Things Done"* that deals with this concept. If you can respond to something in less than two minutes, do it. If not, add it to the queue. Jonathan struggles with this – it goes against his nature – but responding right away can send you down a rabbit hole. You've responded, but the rest of the input remains. It gets to the point where you've fought a lot of fires by the end of the day, but the people who haven't heard back from you yet don't know that, nor do they care. Therefore, Jonathan had to develop checkbox-driven processes at different intervals of the day to process the inputs. This can also help you to recognize when you need more resources.

<https://gettingthingsdone.com/what-is-gtd/>



LESSONS LEARNED

- The second guiding principle Jonathan has learned from his experience is to spend time understanding what matters to your stakeholders. Connect directly with these people; don't assume. Also, recognize that what matters changes. At different periods of time, there will be some things that matter more than others. At the heart of that is looking for the wins. Channel and be the influence for that feedback that comes from your community.
- In community, recognize that you have a tremendous opportunity to serve as a connector between different people. It's both an art and a science to learn how to make those connections effectively and efficiently. Jonathan encourages people to recognize the value of this ability to connect people. Continue to iterate and experiment on how to do this well. The key is to facilitate the introductions with the goal to come away with actionable items. The more and more you can make those connections happen, the more opportunities you create for the magic to happen. Hence, positive feedback loops that show results.

