

commDevMethod

A Community Organizing Methodology for Fedora Commons

Developing community activities around Fedora Commons' priority areas is one of our central functions as an organization. We are well placed to organize communities for development in a variety of areas, especially including development of the core software and application development in a variety of solution areas that have a natural affinity with Fedora. Other community activities could include such things as standards development, issue advocacy or simple information sharing in a particular area.

Rather than take a top-down approach to organizing communities, we think that there is good reason to believe that we can act as the catalyst for self-organizing communities. Taking lessons from others who are applying research about emergence in complex systems and "small world" theory (AKA, "the six degrees of Kevin Bacon"), we have begun to develop a methodology to get started. The basic idea is that communities of interest develop around knowledge bases and good communication infrastructure. By recruiting some motivated individuals in a set of specific roles, we can get a starting team in each area that can work with us on growing the community.

A community effort starts off by creating a vision for the community that sets the goals and defines its purpose. The community then begins to immediately develop a relevant knowledge base and to actively work to extend the membership. Both FC staff and key community members must provide "feedback" to properly stimulate and inspire the community at key moments. Following emergence theory, we assume that higher levels of order will "emerge" out of (to coin a phrase) "the momentum of excitement" among the community members. We would hope that the higher levels of order in this case will result in collaborative activities to develop software, define a new standard, marshal forces to advocate for important actions, etc.

The Vision

A vision statement is an initial condition for the development of a community. Much like a mission statement, it should be a very concise expression of the reason for the community's existence and its motivation to develop.

The Knowledge Base

This is an organized expression of best knowledge about the community and its activities, and relevant information, more generally. For us this probably means a wiki, both of new information and of links to information out on the web.

Goals

Each community should have a set of both long-term and short-term goals explicitly stated.

Assumptions

Each community should have its set of assumptions explicitly stated. These are statements of "what's so" for the community, about the context in which they operate and the process they will follow in operation.

Roles

There are three roles that are key to developing a community in this approach. They should be thought of as functions that need to be covered by the community. Each role should definitely be covered by a motivated individual in the beginning, but should be seen as something that might be distributed among a group of interested community members as things develop.

- The Steward: The main task for the steward is to develop and maintain the vision. This role also makes sure the community can function properly and has the resources it needs. It provides that driving force to get it going and nudges it to keep it moving. This is what we have been calling the "champion."
- The Knowledge gardener: This role that ensures that the community's knowledge base develops and grows. It can be editorial as well as shepherding, nudging the community to share info.
- The Evangelist: This role brings new members that are well suited and have valuable things to offer into the community. Initially this is a key role in finding and bringing in highly motivated people, but is only necessary for as long as the community needs to have its growth stimulated.
- The Sherpa: This role provides stimulation to the community through feedback. Generally, this is probably the role of the Director of Community Strategy and other FC staff.