

# MAKING THE JUMP FROM CONTRIBUTOR TO COMMUNITY MANAGER

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Open Source 101 - Columbia

say you've found an open source project that you really love... and you want to do more than just contribute. or, you love coding, but you don't want to spend the rest of your life interacting more with your computer than you do with people. but you love programming and you love the open source community and all of the cool new things that are happening in technology these days. so... what are your options?

“community management” and “developer relations” are hot terms that are floating around a lot lately... how many of you have heard about it?

ok... and how many of you think it sounds cool because of all of the “exotic” places we travel to throughout the year? you know... like Pittsburgh, where a bunch of my friends are this week for RailsConf. or Pasadena, CA where I was last month, or Columbia, SC... super exotic 🤔

# COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT

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- what does it involve?
- what does it actually look like?
- the good, the bad, the ugly

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I'm here to talk a little bit today about community management:

- what it involves
- what it looks like
- the good, the bad, the ugly — eh... I won't call it ugly. let's say "not as good" 😊

## COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT

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- ▶ what does it involve?
- ▶ what does it actually look like?
- ▶ the good, the bad, the ugly not so good

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- the good, the bad, the ugly — eh... I won't call it ugly. let's say "not as good" 😊

## WHO AM I?

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well... hold up. I know that before I get into my actual content, I should introduce someone else, because let's face it, I won't have your attention until I do.



This is Ember Dog — full name EmberDog Pups McGee Captain Underfoot III — you can follow him on twitter at @ember\_dog — you'll see I've changed the Twitter handle on the bottom right hand corner there. He's a medical alert service dog for me — I'm a T1D and he lets me know when my blood sugar is starting to get too long. But that's a whole other talk about monitoring and performance... not for today.

## WHO AM I?

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journalist → community advocate

feature-writing & storytelling

business value → developer communities

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I like to say I'm a journalist turned community advocate, who is using my feature-writing and storytelling abilities to show the business value of building developer communities.

I started out as a budding journalist, right around the time when all of the newspapers were starting to let go of their reporting staff. So you can see how well that worked for me! I switched into Public Relations — still related to writing, but in a slightly more copy-editing and technical writing sense — and landed a job at O'Reilly Media, where I stayed for 8 years. I put my journalism skills to use learning about each of the topics that I was writing press releases about, and once I got tired talking to people and not with people, I talked them into letting me try this emerging thing called "Community Management."

I eventually built up a community team there, and then went on to work at Chef (an open-source back-end infrastructure) and then SparkPost (an email API).

## WHO AM I?

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communitypulse.io  
@community\_pulse



coming soon via Apress



REdeploy - Aug 16-17  
re-deploy.io

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These days, I'm running my own business, Persea Consulting — providing resources and education about Developer Relations and Community Management both for those who are practicing in those areas as well as the business decision makers who are trying to figure out what in the world those terms mean.

In doing so, I curate DevRel Weekly — a newsletter full of the most recent articles, studies, events, and opinions around Developer Relations... I've founded the podcast "Community Pulse" along with my cohosts Jason Hand & PJ Hagerty... I'm about 3/4 done with a book on the business value of developer relations that will be published by Apress in (fingers crossed) late summer 2018... I just launched a conference called REdeploy — Aug 16-17 in San Francisco that takes a 360° view of resilient engineering — looking at the technology as well as how it impacts the organizations and people involved — CFP opening soon!

in other words... I do a lot and have a lot of side projects and am very involved in a lot of things. maybe that's a good indicator if you're someone who might make a good community manager? you have all sort of projects that you're invested in... things that you love but don't necessarily have all that much time for... and yet you have a hard time turning down new opportunities. that sounds about right! {laugh}

but let's get down to the point of this talk and I'll explain why knowing how to juggle lots of projects simultaneously is important in a moment.

so... community management — what is it?!

## COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT – WHAT IS IT?

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### COMMUNITY:

A group of people who not only share common principles, but also develop and share practices that help individuals in the group thrive.

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let's start by defining “community” —

A group of people who not only share common principles, but also develop and share practices that help individuals in the group thrive.

This could mean people who have gathered around an open source project, or a particular topic (email, for instance), or who are all in a similar job function (the DevOps community, for instance).

so what does it mean to “manage” this community? as I always say, “manage” is a rather strong word. it implies I actually have control 😊 I like to think of it more as building, empowering, or amplifying the voice of, rather than “managing.” so what does this mean? it's going to be different in every company of course, dependent on the goals and priorities, and the direction that the company is headed in. but generally... in broad strokes, what is a community manager?



## COMMUNITY MANAGERS...

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...have the community's  
best interests at heart,  
100% of the time.

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1) it means you're the person who has the community's best interests at heart, 100% of the time.

## PRIORITIES OF A COMMUNITY MANAGER

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1. you
2. your community
3. your company

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that doesn't mean you're not in it for the sake of the company, but it DOES mean that your priorities are

#1: you (we'll talk about that in a moment)

#2: the community

#3: the company

why? because you recognize that when the community succeeds, the company succeeds, but when the company makes a decision that sets the community up for failure — ESPECIALLY when it's an open source product dependent on the community — there's often no coming back.

so what does that mean... how does that work on a practical basis?

## LET'S GET PRACTICAL

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LISTEN

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1) It means a lot of listening. You've heard the phrase "God gave us 2 ears and one mouth for a reason"? I think it was created for this job ;-p This is where my journalism skills came in handy early on. I knew that if I asked a question that someone might not be sure how to answer, if they gave me a pat answer and I started talking again, that was all I'd get out of them on that topic. But if I asked the question, and paused. and waited. and nodded. and just stayed quiet... they would start talking again — maybe just to fill the silence! but they'd start talking about that topic, and I'd get far more information than if I had just asked my next question. So first, listen, and then wait.

## LET'S GET PRACTICAL

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GATHER  
INFORMATION

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2) It means a lot of information gathering. This goes hand-in-hand with listening, but it means actually recording things once you've listened — taking notes and then fleshing those notes out to be able to form cohesive thoughts around the conversation. When I first started exploring Community Management at O'Reilly Media, I submitted what I called “trip reports” — these reports included information about conferences I'd attended, people that I'd met, conversations that I'd had, themes that I'd observed, etc. And at first it seemed like a lot of busy work, reporting all of these things, especially if no one else was going to read them. But as I started to write more of these, I realized that there were themes between all of them. The person who had mentioned a particular topic that they were fascinated with at that conference back in September? The same topic came up 3 more times in the last 4 months. Maybe there's something there! And that's information I could take back to our editors and conference chairs, and work with them to build up a group of experts around it.



3) Which leads me to my third point... community management is just a pseudonym for cruise director

How many of you here have been on a cruise? You know the person who makes sure that you have everything that you need... that you're not feeling left out... that you have someone to talk to and relate to, so that you're having the best possible experience? We're the cruise directors of the technical world.

## LET'S GET PRACTICAL

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CRUISE  
DIRECTOR

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Those people who all mentioned the new topic that they were pursuing? I, as the technical cruise director, am responsible to introduce them... to foster that relationship... to make sure that they're not only pursuing that topic and reporting back to me interesting tidbits, but that they're enjoying doing so, and part of that is building a community around it, which requires other people. So Marie, let me just introduce you to Bob over here, and the two of you can chat about the latest doodads and thingamabobs that you're looking into, and let me just fade into the background while you get more and more excited about this fascinating topic.

But let me remember to gather that information and bring it back to the team, because... >

## COMMUNITY MANAGERS...

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...are responsible to  
represent the community  
to the company.

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2) As the person who has the community's best interests at heart, this also means you're responsible to translate those interests, those concerns, those excitements, those exciting occasions, to the engineering, product, marketing, and sales teams.

This is where the liaison and translation pieces that I touched on earlier come into play. As the expert on your community members,

**WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT  
RESPONSIBILITY**



you have the power, and therefore the responsibility, to make a difference for your community.



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But that also means that you need to be able to speak “marketing” and “sales” alongside “engineering,” and depending on what your background is, that’s not an easy thing!

For me, I had to dig deep into the engineering side of things and find out what things meant. Where did “git” fit in? That’s the same as “GitHub”, right? Well... kind of? But, it’s nuanced. And what about Java and JavaScript? Those have got to be the same thing, right? Yeah... no <laughter>. But I learned, and I grew, and I pushed myself to understand. And when I didn’t understand, I asked more questions. And I found that if I’m not scared to ask questions, people don’t mind answering them. They don’t expect me to know everything — it’s just that they know what they’re talking about SO well that they often don’t stop to think about the fact that not everyone speaks their language.

So why is it so important for me to be able to speak all of these languages?



Respect.

If I don't speak marketing... if I don't understand the role of business development... if I don't feel the pain of the sales cycle, why would those teams want to listen to me? They wouldn't! And I don't blame them! Because suddenly I'm some random person coming in there telling them how to do their job, and nobody likes that!

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But if I spend time getting to know them... understanding their pain points and why they're passionate about their roles, then when I hear about something from the community that's related to one of their projects, I can bring it up in a helpful and relevant manner. So instead of just saying, "that's a terrible tweet!" or "why in the world would we want to pursue an integration with that company?" I can say "I noticed that the community has been really excited about this topic recently — some of them have been using this hashtag, or referencing this particular community twitter account — I bet that would get a lot of engagement!" or "I'd love to learn more about the integrations that you're pursuing and how I can help connect you with community members who might be able to give you feedback on integrations they'd love to see, or the types of things that they're looking for." and then instead of it coming across as a "holier than thou" stance, it comes across as helpful information from a team player, which, after all, we are!

Additionally, if we have a good relationship with these departments and can make these hand-offs, that's a great metric to track. And if you're at all familiar with the world of developer relations and community management, you know that one of the hardest things is figuring out what metrics are worthwhile and useful to track. But keeping track of the number of connections you've made, the number of projects you've been able to offer feedback on, or the number of "warm hand-offs" you've made of community members to other people within the company, whether marketing for a content opportunity, product for beta testing, or sales for an intro their decision makers... those are direct points of value that you can trace back to your work.

You'll find that as this respect and rapport is built, and as people start to recognize you as the expert that you are, your coworkers will start approaching you for your opinion on things before they're released, so that instead of you having to reactively approach people about things that have already happened, you can offer feedback to things before they launch. As Shira Levine, another great community mgr says, we aren't growth marketing (or product, or sales), but we're the best friend who offers insight and advice.

And that relationship benefits us as well! With the trust and respect built up, we can now ask questions about the product roadmap and make suggestions that would

## COMMUNITY MANAGERS...

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...are also responsible  
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2.5) Because you see, after we represent the community to the company and advocate on their behalf, it's time to put our company hat on and represent them back to the community.

As the people that the community knows and trusts, it's on us to take the responses from the company about the suggestions that the community has brought forth, or the bugs that they have found, or the concerns that they have, and communicate the company's standpoint back to the community. Now, we won't always be able to do this in a way that makes the community happy... sometimes it's tough love, and sometimes the decision is simply out of our hands, even when we aren't in agreement with it. And here's where it gets sticky, because we have to accurately (and respectfully) represent the company... but sometimes we have to say things that the community isn't going to like. And we'll have to pick our battles wisely... deciding which problems are ones that we really need to push back on, and which ones, while not everyone will like the outcome, aren't hills worth dying on.

But this is where the communication comes into play. There are ways to say things that set the company up to look bad, and ways to represent a situation that while people may not like it, they understand that it was a tough decision.

## COMMUNITY MANAGERS...

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...have to take care  
of themselves first.

@mary\_grace

3) have to take care of themselves first.

I know this sounds counterintuitive to everything else that I've said given that we are the people who have the community's best interests at heart and are their advocate, but I can't emphasize this enough. As the people who are looking out for the community's best interests, we have to, have to, have to ensure that we are looking out for our own best interests first. Because if we aren't taking care of ourselves, how can we take care of anyone else?



So there will be times when you have to take a step back and say no... when you have to put your own oxygen mask on first, just like they tell you on an airplane... when you have to delegate and take time off and trust other people to do their job.

## COMMUNITY MANAGERS...

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...have to take care  
of themselves first.

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You may be asking why this is different than any other job... what sets this one apart that we should be taking care of ourselves first? I'll give you a hint... this applies to ALL jobs — not just this one! However, that being said, this job tends to draw on not just your mental wherewithal, but your emotional and physical strength as well. You're building relationships, putting yourself out there on a regular basis, having to be "on" at every event whether or not you're an extrovert, juggling a lot of different conversations and tasks on a regular basis... and even those of us who are extroverts need a break sometimes! so we need to be extra careful to take breaks when needed... to take care of ourselves... to keep an eye on our energy and motivation and take steps to prevent burnout earlier than most.

## COMMUNITY MANAGERS ARE...

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Journalists

Teachers

Cruise directors

Jugglers

Liaisons

Translators

Performing Artists

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## COMMUNITY MANAGERS ARE...

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100% driven by a passion  
for building technical communities  
and bringing people together.

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## SO WHAT'S NEXT? (THE STUDENT VERSION)

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- ▶ Take classes outside of your major
  - ▶ Communication & writing skills
  - ▶ Developer Relations internships

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so... what next?

- take things outside of your major classes (if you're a computer science major) — I'd even suggest a minor in communications.
  - communication skills
  - writing skills
- DevRel internships — y'all are lucky — these now exist!

## SO WHAT'S NEXT? (FOR EVERYONE)

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- Resources
  - Twitter: #DevRel #CMgr
  - DevRel Weekly
  - What's your focus?

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- take advantage of the resources that are out there — join the conversations on Twitter around #DevRel and #CMgr. stay up on the topics of conversation (plug for newsletter).
- Figure out if you want to focus on open source or if you simply like combining people with programming, and then find products that you're interested in and passionate about. You **HAVE** to be passionate about the product that you're selling, because at the end of the day, if you as the “drum major” aren't excited about what you're doing, how can you expect your community to be?

## SO WHAT'S NEXT? (THE FTE VERSION)

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- Become an open source project maintainer
- Get involved in conversations on Twitter, Stack Overflow, dev.to, etc.
- Talk to Marketing
  - Volunteer to help out at events
  - Take a stab at writing a technical blogpost about your latest project
- Help out in your company's community Slack or forum

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Take community work for a test drive and see if you like the pace and the work — there's a LOT of context switching and moving around between tasks, so don't expect to have blocks of time that you can focus on one particular thing. If that doesn't work for you, this job may not be for you... and that's OK! as an FTE, you can still help out at events, offer advice on technical marketing materials or write the occasional blogpost. chances are, you're a part of the community

# QUESTIONS?

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