Extended Abstract

Experiences with Civility and the Role of a Social Contract in Virtual Communities

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It is curious why group policy-making for things such as social contracts and civility standards in virtual communities is so problematic.

There appears to be a 3-layered model, that we call 'Communitas'. Successful online communities, that we are familiar with, are structured according to this model. The foundation layer of 'Communitas' is Communications Technology. This is the 'soil' out of which everything else emerges. Only about 5% of the population will muster the technical -- and at times arcane -- skills to create and develop the underlying Communications Technology.

The second layer of 'Communitas' is Community Building. This is the social and leadership layer where 90% of the participants spend their time getting to know their colleagues, identifying and understanding goals, missions, and issues of concern to the community, and building trust. If Communications Technology is the 'soil', Community Building is the 'garden'.

Once Community Building has reached a level where there is a substantial level of participation, interaction, and trust, a remarkable third layer emerges. This layer can be referred to as 'Communion'. 'Communion' is a profoundly transformational relation of People-to-People and People-to-Ideas. These are life-changing ideas and interpersonal relationships, which fundamentally redirect individuals to focus their time, energy and talent in ways that promote personal and professional growth, clarification of individual and community values, and

adoption of meaningful personal and group goals. Communion is the 'fruit' of the 'garden' of Community Building, growing on the 'soil' of Communications Technology.

So to summarize, the 'Communitas' model looks like this:

Communications Technology ==> Community Building ==> Communion
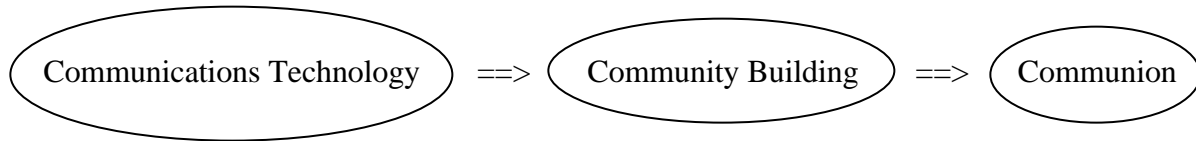
So the next question is: "how to craft an online community in which Communitas flowers?" In our experience the key ingredient is a Social Contract, which establishes the terms of civility. The Social Contract sets forth the purpose and goals of the community and an agreement among the participants as to how they will interact, treat each other, and resolve conflicts. It has been our experience that communities fail when the Social Contract is abrogated. It has been our experience that communities are successful when they are founded on a mutually understood and agreed upon Social Contract. Note that it is not possible to have an *imposed* Social Contract; a Social Contract can only exist if all participants voluntarily agree to it. For this reason Social Contract communities tend to small private communities. Large public communities are not amenable to the Social Contract model. Large pubic communities with an open-door policy tend to run toward ill-mannered political factionalism. These communities do not support horizontal dialogue; they tend to be dominated by a small number of outspoken partisans who collectively construct, what we charitably be referred to as, a 'lunatic drama,' characterized by mutual disrespect. Such communities can be long lasting and even entertaining but they rarely foster insight, problem solving or personal growth. By contrast the small Social Contract communities can carry their participants along collaborative and profound transformational journeys.