Welcome to Open Source Voices. My name is Nicole Huesman.

Vibrant, thriving communities—healthy communities—are so important to the success of open source projects. Today we’re here to jam with two folks who not only share a love of music, but are both deeply engaged in open source communities. Jeffrey "Jefro" Osier-Mixon, Open Source Community Manager at Intel, and Jono Bacon, Leading Community Strategist, Author & Consultant. Welcome, Jefro and Jono!

Let’s start with how the two of you got involved in open source and open source communities. What were the paths you took?

[Jono] I started out in 1998, my older brother came to stay for a couple of weeks and I was complaining about Windows at the time, and he introduced me to this newfangled thing called Linux, and I just became captivated about the idea of people all over the world collaborating together on software. The Internet wasn’t particularly prevalent in the UK back then, and the idea of people electronically working together, that anybody from anywhere could play a role in this evolving space of technology was just fascinating to me. But it was really the people angle that fascinated me. The technology was interesting and I stole slackware on my machine and all the rest of it, but it was the psychology of how people think and work together, how do you solve problems, all this kind of stuff, and it just switched on a lightbulb in my head, and I kind of bounced around to a few projects here and there, to a news site, which was my first big project in the UK, and then I participated in KDE [a Linux desktop project], and then joined a company as a consultant doing open source work, and then went to Canonical, which is where I really kind of nose-dived in to the deep end of how to work with an open source community on the Ubuntu project.

And Jefro, you’ve done so many different things. We’d love to hear your story as well.

[Jefro] I actually got started in open source before it was called open source. We used to call it free software. My first job out of college—I have a degree in creative writing and English literature, but I also spent two and a half years in the computer science department—so, I had kind of this odd unicorn set of skills, and I started working for this little company called Cygnus Support in 1992, literally answering the phone and delivering mail. And it turned out rapidly that they needed technical writing as well. For those who don’t know, Cygnus was responsible for providing commercial support for the GNU tools, so it was really the first open source support company. I really cut my teeth there, and was there for a few years, and have worked on and off mostly in open source, mostly related to tools or operating systems in one form or another.

[Jono] Cygnus was not just one of the first companies, but figuring out that balance between working with the community and making money, and it must’ve been really cool to be a part of that at that time, 'cause that was really blazing the trail.
[Jefro] It was really amazing place, and I met some incredible people there.

When we talk about the health of communities, health is such a weighty word. What does that mean to each of you?

[Jefro] I was actually thinking about this and I realized that health really boils down to two things for me. One, it's a measure of whether it meets the needs of the stakeholders, and for an open source project, that means whatever sponsors the project has, it means the maintainers and developers, and of course, it also means the larger user community. And the other indicator of health in my mind is whether the project follows the open source principles of transparency and meritocracy and upstream first and all the rest.

[Jono] I would echo everything that Jefro's just said, and also what you said, Nicole. Health is such a loaded term in many ways. It's kind of like the word, ethics. Everyone has got their own opinion about what ethics are, and in many cases, there are common agreements on things like 'murder is bad,' but then there's lots of grey when it comes to other elements about whether they're ethical or unethical. I think the same thing applies to community health particularly within the context of open source, particularly within the commercial context. I think it's important to understand, are the needs of the stakeholders being met. Otherwise, at some point, the stakeholders are going to stop writing checks. But also, are the relationships healthy. When you look at open source communities, we often look at the code as the central artifact and then the community is something that wraps around the code. But I think it's actually the other way around. If you build a healthy community, that's productive, that's got good relationships, that can solve problems, that can spin up solutions very quickly, then you will get great artifacts, not just code but you'll also get documentation, and translation, and other things. To me, it's important that it spans that full contrast of components.

Jono, can you talk a little bit about how the health of a community would differ from the health of an open source project?

[Jono] I think all good open source projects need a community, but not necessarily all good communities need an open source project. As a consultant, I work with a bunch of companies who are building communities that have nothing to do with technology at all. But the principles that go into high quality community engagement are still present. There are a couple of examples—you need good leadership, and that in itself is a whole set of things to consider—being a good listener, being collaborative, helping people to succeed, you need an environment that welcomes quality of treatment as well as judgment of contributions, you need all of the nuts and bolts, whatever you're actually building, if you're building a community that's constructing materials, you need ... the psychological and interpersonal components are really part of the community ...

What do you think is one of the least understood, or most surprising, things about community management?

[Jefro] Well, there are two things that I would want to talk about. One is how much of the soft skill is important. It is important for a community manager to understand the needs of the
community that they’re dealing with, so they need to have a basic understanding of what they’re diving into. Now, if I’m an expert in cloud computing and then I want to go and be a community manager for an embedded project, there would be a certain amount of ramping up that I would have to do to understand the language and the patterns that emerge. The other things is just exactly how many different jobs a community manager has. I know that’s not always the case; it depends how a project is set up and how much support it has from its sponsors. But I’ve found community management to be very much a catch-all, gap-filling role in which I would one day find myself doing very sort of menial tasks and slugging boots across airports and then the next day I’d be involved in executive conversations and helping members onboard and so, it’s a very vibrant job.

What have been some keys to effective community management that you’ve observed along the way?

[Jono] The one thing that I’ve been kind of banging the drum about for a while now is that I actually don’t think a lot of community managers are really community managers—I think they’re evangelists. But to me, evangelism is one component of a much bigger story. You go out and do a ton of evangelism, you speak at conferences, you do meet-ups, you do blogging, you do social media, all of the kinds of things evangelists do, and someone comes to join your community, they open the front door, and the path to producing something that’s valuable to them as well as to the community, if that’s a contorted, windy, topsy-turvy maze, people are going to get bored and move on. So to me, good community managers look at the end-to-end experience from, how do you evangelize and bring people in, but also, how do you optimize the on-ramp, how do you incentivize people, how do you make sure that the community is personal, how do you make sure that the community is a safe place to be, how do you build opportunity, and train people and mentor them. It’s weaving that whole environment is what a great community manager does. Otherwise, the evangelism pulls people in, but ultimately, they may just be disappointed.

[Jefro] That’s a really, really good point and I just want to highlight that empathy is one of the most important skills that you’re walking in the door with to help enable these communities to emerge.

[Jono] When you’re new in anything, like, I have a 5 ½ year old boy and he started summer camp a few weeks ago and he showed up and he was nervous and a bit scared and now he’s really finding his feet. When you’re new, the psychology is very different to when you’re comfortable, and I think we need to be mindful of architecting our on-ramp to make sure that we adapt for that.

Yeah, I absolutely agree. Jefro and I were talking about inclusivity being one of the primary principles of open source, and how do we build more inclusive communities. And then, this even reminds me of some of the work that I’ve done in diversity and inclusion where there are two pieces to this puzzle—the attracting diverse talent, but then also, how do you build an
environment such that all of the contributions are encouraged and welcomed. I wonder, too, what aspects do you think come into play when we talk about different geographies …

[Jono] One of the challenges here … I think this is going to sound a little bit politically incorrect, but very lightly so … We're evolving into a culture that we're becoming a little bit homogenous, that we need to treat everybody the same and balance everyone down to the same average, and certainly, for obvious reasons, within diversity and inclusion, we should absolutely be doing that, but I think while we do that, it's important that we don't forget our differences and harness our differences in different ways. To give you an example, the audience reaction you get in different parts of the world differs. You give a talk in South America, you're gonna get a very different reaction to a talk done in Berlin and a very different reaction to a talk done in Mumbai or in Beijing. That's because there are different cultural differences between people, and I think we need to be mindful of that not just in terms of how we engage—I mean, obviously this should all be on a platform of equality—but also, what different peoples' motivations are. Like, one story I always talk about is this kid who dropped me an email a couple of weeks after I was working at Canonical who was based in the middle of Africa and he was really motivated about Ubuntu and he would walk a couple of hours to his local town and he'd earn money during the week doing chores and he'd buy an hour's worth of Internet access and spend 2-3 hours walking back home, and he'd focus that time—his Internet access—on Ubuntu, and what that told me, for many reasons, was my job was to make his hours as effective as possible, but also, we need to be mindful of the fact that there are people who need to walk to an Internet café to pass time on Ubuntu. You know, it's easy to forget that when you live in the Bay Area. So, let's not homogenize ourselves so much that we forget the really valuable cultural differentials.

[Jefro] I don't think that's politically incorrect at all. I love that story.

I had a mentor, we were talking about how important each of our differences is, that's our uniqueness that we can view as strengths that we bring to the table.

[Jefro] As a community manager, I find that I naturally capitalize on that just from getting to know people in the community, and for me, it's more of a personal thing and less of a cultural thing.

So, I'm going to change this slightly, and say, what do you think the role of companies or corporations is in open source and open source communities?

[Jefro] It seems fairly clear to me that the reason that corporations get involved with open source is because they benefit from it. If corporations are people, then they would be psychopaths because they're kind of boiled down to their most basic tendencies. They just want to survive, they want to grow, they want to thrive, they don't necessarily feel empathy, and so it's our role, I think, inside these corporations, to do that. That being said, we also need to make sure that these constructs that we create such as open source projects also need to
be able to benefit those corporations. Or else the support will disappear. It can be symbiotic. In an ideal world, a corporation would enable a project to rise to its natural level rather than trying to force it into something that it isn't and when you get multiple corporations working together that all have different needs and they're all representing their own needs that can be really dynamic and it can build something that's larger than the sum of its parts. It's also possible for one corporation to dominate and squash that entire process, but I think that, as a community manager, that's what I always thought was my role to prevent.

[Jono] I would also say that this has been fundamentally surprising, I think, for a lot of companies is … The primary motivator was initially economics. It's kind of like people who start exercising for the first time. They do it because they want to get healthy but then they realize that they look better and it reduces anxiety and depression and all of these other benefits they didn't anticipate, and I think we've seen the growth of companies in open source has helped them to say, my staff enjoy this, I build better internal skills, my brand recognition increases, it's easier for me to hire … like, people are growing up now in an open source, collaborative environment … they don't want to go and work in a stuffy cube where they're not allowed to collaborate with other people. So, I get the impression there will always be an economic driver, but I do think that increasingly it's going to be the cultural benefits of that, particularly as the younger generation gets into the work force and, frankly, demands that.

No one company can achieve … you know, we all need each other … it isn't enough that we have fantastic collaboration within a single community. These different communities need to work together to achieve something that is bigger than the sum of its parts.

[Jefro] Yeah, the projects need to feed off of each other—particularly, feed their own needs into the process.

Before we bring this conversation to a close, are there any other things that you'd like to share?

[Jono] You know, for anyone listening to this, I think open source is the wild west that's been habited, you know, it's got habitation in it, like, people have built buildings, and they've got running water, and all those kinds of things, but there's still a lot of chaos out there, I think they're still figuring out, particularly in the community side, and I think everybody can play a role in helping the broader community to understand that …

[Jefro] It's a chaos, but it's more of an inspired happy chaos. So yeah, if somebody's listening to this and wondering if they can jump in … Basically, there's low risk. There's not a whole lot that you can do with an open source project that would negatively affect you, and the upside is so incredibly positive.

It is always such a pleasure to talk to both of you. We appreciate you joining us today. We would love to have you back, so thank you!
Until next time, thanks for listening!