

The Community Builder—a Conversation with Fabian Pfortmüller

Dave Bayless: I had the great pleasure recently to speak with [Fabian Pfortmüller](#) about relationships, trust, and community.

Fabian is a Swiss community builder based in Amsterdam. He's a cogent thinker and writer and an experienced entrepreneur.

I discovered Fabian through [his writing on Medium.com](#) in his role as co-founder of the [Together Institute](#). He's also the co-author of the [Community Canvas](#), an open-source framework for community builders, the co-founder of [Sandbox](#), a global community of entrepreneurs under the age of 30, and an Innovator in Residence at the [Kauffman Foundation](#).

Fabian, how do you see the difference between a network and a community?

Fabian Pfortmüller: How I differentiate between a network and a community is that a network connects and a community cares, which is a quote I got out of [an HBR article](#). Another way to think about that distinction is to imagine them as concentric circles, where community is more of an inner circle, where people have a higher commitment, while a network is maybe just an outer circle of the same group, where people are more loosely connected. So that's a simple way how I like to start thinking about network and community.

Dave: Why is it that you care so much about community?

Fabian: My personal story brought me to experience what it means not to have community. I think that's where my curiosity and my passion for community comes from. I was not one of the cool kids. That's for sure. And that's when I experienced what it means if you don't belong in a group, and I realized how harsh that can be. And then when I did find friends and a circle where I felt like I belonged, I think I appreciated it even more because I hadn't had it for many years throughout high school and elementary school.

We think a lot about impact and changing things in the world. Human relationships are so full of potential, so full of generosity, kindness, creativity,

resilience, but, in our current worldview, we're not that focused on bringing out that potential.

Over the years I developed this hypothesis that change and transformation as well as well-being happen along the lines of relationships. For us to change and transform is a hard thing. But if you do it with other people, It becomes possible. So, that's why I became so passionate about relationships and community being just a form of how relationships materialize and come together.

Dave: What does it mean to build a community at the speed of trust?

Fabian: I found that when I work with organizations to weave a community, there's often very unrealistic expectations how fast that can happen. We make a timetable, and it says by October we have the first hundred people, and then by December we have five hundred people, and then by one year we'll have 10,000 people. Why I think that is totally unrealistic is because each person has to be woven into the group. There has to be a relationship that is created, and human relationships tend to take a long time to form.

Today you and I are talking for the first time. We have a first impression. We get to know each other a little bit. If that moves in a gentle way, we will be able to deepen that next time. But it's a spectrum, right? It takes a while to go from "Hmm, this's someone whose email I'll answer," to "This is someone who I will call on a Saturday evening if I'm in trouble."

People in groups build trust one tiny step at a time. So, I think the speed at which relationships grow is the speed at which trust grows, and that is very slow. For organizations that means they need to invest with a very long-term horizon and with a lot of patience.

Dave: Let's expand on that. What are the implications of the speed of trust on how we go about designing our community.

Fabian: One of the implications it has for my own role is first me getting into relationship with people and then, step-by-step, bringing those people into relationship with each other.

I think trust has a lot to do with behavior. How do we treat each other in groups? We have an opportunity in community to treat each other differently and better than we do in normal life. Someone who is in the same community as us, we might treat with more generosity, with more attention. with more

patience than the random person on the street. For that to happen, we first need to know what expectations are and what the values are, and that comes with role modeling. Someone has to set those values and then really live those values, embody those values, role model those values.

The second thing I think, trust needs a container. The space of the community has to be delineated from everyday life in a certain way. That can also have its shadow side. Community sometimes can become bubbles that are not really in relationship with the rest of the world anymore. But if you ignore that for a moment, I think it needs a safe container.

We have to then start to weave from a very core place with our own relationships, step-by-step bringing people in what we call weaving from the inside out. Once there is a core of group of people who feels trust, then we can expand versus trying to bring a hundred people into a room and see what happens.

Dave: What behaviors have you observed, or maybe some behaviors you've inadvertently been guilty of yourself, that can erode trust in the context of cultivating your community?

Fabian: I think all these behaviors that I have exhibited will be too long for this podcast. But I can start with a few. A lot of communities have financial ups and downs I've been in that situation many times. In the past, I thought it was better to not tell the community that we were having financial troubles in order not to scare the members. I realized that that is actually a really dumb way of approaching it, but it's quite scary to be really open and vulnerable about what's truly going on.

Another thing that can easily erode trust is seeing that there's tension in the group, but not speaking to the tension or not creating a place for that tension to be addressed and to be healed eventually.

I would say the most basic thing is if we, as a group have written values, and if I have quite a visible function, maybe a community leader, and I do not embody those values, there's a lack of integrity. People can tell when values are just some nice words that are written on a website. That can also very easily erode trust.

Dave: Besides simply not engaging in those trust-destroying behaviors, is there anything in particular that you found is effective at actually cultivating trust over time?

Fabian: I think the most generalized behavior I could describe would be to set expectations with future members early on that there will be failures and there will be mistakes and that we invite people at a regular rhythm into a conversation and we create an environment where people feel safe to actually speak to what's not going well, and hopefully do that in a gentle and compassionate voice so that leadership can actually hear it. If we as a community are able to learn and forgive and keep evolving, that's really beautiful and important.

The opposite of that is a community that believes in perfection, and I think that's not possible because communities are a living web of relationships. Just as we are flawed and full of the good and the bad, so are the collective versions of us as well. Accepting that and designing around that helps to build an environment of trust and learning, which is much easier said than done, because learning is hard. Accepting failure is hard. Setting expectations consistently is hard. Creating an environment where people speak openly about failure is not easy, either, and I continued to struggle with actually implementing that.

Dave: So, final question for now. If there was one book you could recommend to somebody relating to successful community, what would it be?

Fabian: I'll choose two. If you're looking for something that aligns more with Western thinking, I would recommend Peter Blocks' [Community: The Structure of Belonging](#). He has really changed my perspective on how a community can either be there to solve a problem or be a vessel for transformation, and he outlines conversations that help to really move community toward the vessel of transformation.

If you're looking to a deeper philosophy around community weaving, there's actually a lot to be learned from indigenous perspectives. a book like [Braiding Sweetgrass](#) is really powerful. I've learned a lot from it and continue to learn from.