How many of you are familiar with the statement “it takes a village to raise a child”? I recently gave a talk on the topic of “building the right village, if it takes a village” where I spoke about how we all need to build a support network — the village — around us to raise our child - whether that child is our job, our team, our company, our ambition, our community or...a literal child.

A community is a village. If you paid attention to the keynotes yesterday - whether it was GraphQL, Uber, ASWF, etc. - they were all asking folks to join their communities and help grow the project.

So, today it is more important for us to understand that the communities that we are building — that can only happen when we make them “accessible”. And accessibility to these communities doesn’t happen automatically. What do I mean by accessible? I am here to talk about how we must be intentional and purposeful about building a community that makes everyone feel welcome.

I am Swarna Podila, and I am the official Cloud Foundry cat herder, I mean, community manager.
Of all the places, I think you folks here clearly know what it takes to launch a community, especially an open source community.

Getting a community started is relatively easy. So what is the challenge here?

Photo by Annie Spratt on Unsplash
This. The challenge is scaling the community. Scaling is hard. As James Governor said recently at the event Monkigras in London — scaling is hard...doing things at scale is hard. And I agree with him; scaling is hard because it makes things apparent to us whether our community and our processes are a good thing or if it is a face plant.

Governance becomes extremely difficult —
- who gets to decide how the project/technology should move forward?
- Who gets to approve code quality?
- Who gets to decide the quantity and quality of documentation?
- Who gets to decide the pace of development?
- Who gets to decide who gets “in” and how they get in to the community?

This doesn’t cover the entire gamut of the challenges involved, but you get the idea.

Ensuring growth of a community, especially healthy growth is not easy. It is not impossible, but it is definitely not easy.

So what are the things a community “can” do to make sure the community is healthy and everyone feels welcome?

Photo by davide ragusa on Unsplash
I work as a community manager for the cloud foundry community. Since this community is the closest to me, I thought I could use this as an example. So, what is cloud foundry and what exactly does the community look like?

The Cloud Foundry project originally started back in 2011 at VMware and the team spun out as a company - pivotal - who contributed the code to the community by helping form the Cloud Foundry Foundation (under The Linux Foundation) as a non-profit entity that can be the unbiased caretaker of the technology. At the "Foundation", we are a team of 8 people that cannot possibly work on any technical aspects of Cloud Foundry itself. We solely rely on our community to contribute to the code, documentation, awareness, and all other such aspects.
Folks in our community have a lot of channels they use to communicate with each other, exchange ideas, ask questions, etc. These are the three “channels” that are probably used more often than other channels. Github, Slack, and online documentation.

But…there are over SIX HUNDRED github channels, around 300 slack channels where real-time conversations happen on specific topics across about 10,000 members in the workspace. And if you’re brand new to the community and want to read an online document - good luck with that.

So how does our community make it easy for others? There are little things that we can all do to make that happen. For example, pinned messages or channel purpose are well-utilized features by our cloud foundry folks. Little updates like whom to ask a question or whom to pair with or whom to interrupt or where the docs for latest release are or a link to the pivotal tracker story the team is working of or a quick tip like “need help? Click here” — will make a tremendous difference.

Pinned GitHub repos and repos with clear definitions and informational readmes will make a world of difference for folks, especially those that are new to the community or to the project.

Docs — making them searchable, interlinking the pages, making it easy for folks to contribute to docs — esp when something needs to corrected or updated, is extremely important.

Slack: Photo by Scott Webb on Unsplash
Github:Photo by Brina Blum on Unsplash
Documents: Photo by ron dyar on Unsplash
So, how DO we do it? Well, these people. Regardless of how big the community is, these people in the community make sure that folks in the community never feel alienated or ignored. When I joined the foundation about a year and a half ago, I did not know anything about the technology. Cloud Foundry is a complex platform. Which is why everyone focuses on empathy and being kind.

The community ensures such little details.

Now are the foundation, even we have a responsibility to ensure the same. Our events team, for example, ensures so many nontrivial details like:

- Venue accessibility
- Free onsite child care AND a nursing room
- Non-binary restrooms
- Quiet room—so folks can recharge themselves, because, it’s not just our devices that need to be recharged
- Communication stickers — red (please don’t talk to me), yellow (please talk to me only if I know you), and green (talk to me)
- Pronoun stickers
- First-aid/onsite medical assistance
- Code of conduct that is printed in a big sign and placed right near the registration desk — and CoC spells out the expected and unacceptable behaviors, along with the consequences of such behavior. And it also spells out what to do if they’re either a target or a witness of an incident, what they can do to handle the incident response.
- Registration forms — we had a long internal discussion on the specific ways we need to frame a question, especially questions about gender identity, pronouns, etc. We do not take these aspects lightly — because we need to ensure that everyone feels welcome, everyone is respected, everyone is valued.
- Diversity scholarships, for those who cannot cover their own travel and hotel for our events

And so many more.
Now does this all mean that the cloud foundry community is perfect and we have solved everything?

Not at all! It is a journey. We are continuously learning. We have folks in our community that actively work on these aspects not just with their words, but with their actions. We have allies that step up and support folks when needed. We have folks doing inspiring work and do not shy away from sharing their work—not because they want to show off their work, but because they want everyone in the community to do such awesome work they and their team are doing.

On the events side, we learned that we need to advertise our daycare and quiet room, for example, a lot more than we have done in the past because we haven’t had a lot of folks take advantage of those benefits at our events.

And there are more. But the one thing that we all firmly believe in—is that this is a journey and we constantly learn and iterate to become better.
So, in essence, if we want to build an accessible community, the only way you can make it happen is when you “make space”. Make space for folks to join, to be heard, to learn, to share, and to be part of our journey. Make that little space, make it a better place, make a little space.

Thank you.