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**Kristina:** Our next session, our final keynote and conversation of Confab 2020, is Ms. Keri Maijala from LinkedIn, who also happens to be your host for karaoke this evening. Keri has been to approximately, I think she has been to every single Confab in Minneapolis, which makes her a national hero. We'll confirm that when she comes back. Keri is a manager of UX writing at LinkedIn. This topic is probably out of all the topics nearest and dearest to my heart. Her talk is on creating a community of practice, Keri.

**Keri Maijala:** [silence 00:00:47] with the UX writing team at LinkedIn. Today we're going to be talking about building a community of practice. This is my tenth Confab Central. I have been to every Confab Central since it started in 2011. As I was putting together this presentation, I was suddenly attacked by what's come to be known as Confab feelings. Now, Confab feelings for those of you who are new to the Confab family, started in 2013 as a hashtag to describe that emotional response, that joy and relief, of having found your people. There was even a little bit of sadness that got mixed into Confab feelings when we all had to leave one another after the conference was over.

My particular attack of Confab feelings came about when I realized I forgot to cancel my extended stay in Minneapolis. I was going to be in Minneapolis for over a week because They Might Be Giants was playing at 1st Avenue a couple of nights before the conference. I was going to see the Biggest Ball of Twine in Minnesota, everybody that was happening and now it's not. It's okay. It's okay though. As I was canceling my extended stay, I had to go to the Hyatt website and I saw a picture of the Hyatt lobby. For some reason, this was the thing that set me off. Like an idiot, I started going through all of my Confab photos and I saw a nice bar and I saw the Otter, and I saw Lauren Park.

I saw all the lovely faces of the people who have become my colleagues, my friends, my extended community of practice. I realized I wasn't going to see any of those places or get to hug any of the people that those spaces belonged to. I was bummed. Then I had to remind myself that those were the expectations for the Before Times, because in the Before Times, there was this idea that in-person was real and everything else was just other. Even in communities that had started online, it seemed as if it didn't become real until this in-person meetup happened, but we're not in the Before Times anymore.

We're in the During Times. Some things have changed and we don't know if they're going to change back again. Furthermore, we don't know if they should change back again. What I do know is that we still have communities, and we still have communities of practice and what makes them good is still valid. Now we have this amazing opportunity to re-examine what it means when we say community. I think most people have an idea of what is meant when we say the word community, as I say, the word community to you, something probably comes to mind. You're probably thinking of your city or your town.

Your company, your company can be a community, your place of worship, or even as something as small as your cul-de-sac, your immediate neighbors. In reality, a community can be a lot of things. In our LinkedIn research, we found that community can be a thing, a group of people united by a common purpose, meaningful relationships, and regular interaction. It can also be a concept, an emotional resonance, a state of being evoking feelings of belongings and support. You have to have both of these components to have a successful community of practice. As we dug deeper, we found that there were four conveniently alliterative building blocks that make up successful communities, and they are the four Ps.

Purpose, why the community exists, what the value is to the individual, and to the discipline; participation, how you collaborate, how you show up; parameters, rules and tools; and of course, people, those who make up the community and their roles and relationship. All of these things need to blend together to make a successful community of practice. What makes a community of practice different than a regular community? In cultivating communities of practice, a guide to managing knowledge, they describe it as groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on a regular basis.

They go on to say they become informally bound in the value that they find in learning together. The key component in the community of practice is learning, sharing knowledge, developing a cohesive point of view. Now, this doesn't mean that other types of communities don't learn because obviously they do, but learning is the defining characteristic of a community of practice. When I think of the community, I think of a shared situation. When I think of the community of practice, I think of a shared purpose, and that shared purpose, at least at the beginning of creating a community of practice, must be deliberate.

When potential community of practice members are thinking about joining your community, they're thinking about mainly two things. They're thinking about what is this community? They're also thinking about what's in it for me? To make this decision easier for them, you need to make sure that the topic and the mission should be stated outright. This mission should be easily discoverable, especially for the people that come after the founding of the community. The expectations for the members around time spent and how they contribute should be consistent. When those criteria aren't met, that's when people leave.

One of our research participants shared with us, there was a mismatch between what I thought the community was and what it turned out to be. It was a good learning, but I'm not involved anymore. I asked some community of practice leaders and members why they created or belong to a community of practice and here are some of their answers. Sharing frustrations, learning from those who have lived it, and talked to people that say that they learned things in one meeting, that it would have taken them weeks, months, if not years, to learn, finding your people. We talked about that Confab feelings, again.

Finding inspiration, hearing about what others are doing and how you can apply that to your own work. Getting feedback from people that know what your challenges are. Recruiting and finding work and building that personal brand showing what you know, showing that you're an expert in what you do. For our team at LinkedIn, I think it's more about telling the story about content strategy and UX writing in order to build our team. We are a really small team right now. Including myself we have four UX writers and we have some work to do to show and communicate that full value and make that common knowledge.

In creating the community of practice, what I have seen is that a point of view develops around the practice. It creates this unified point of view and feeling of belonging. Now, this doesn't mean that everybody agrees on everything all the time, but it does mean that ideas around why your community of practice exists, how your practice differs from other practices, and how you communicate that to other disciplines and other teams. That comes to light. Even more than that, I think participation in a community of practice helps you distill all of that information. That creates an efficiency of expression.

As these ideas that just exist in your head are expressed or expressed by somebody else in your community of practice, it creates that shared language that becomes shorthand for your practice. What I find really fun is that it's going to happen organically. I have heard team members say something that I have said verbatim in order to describe something to someone else in another discipline. I've done the same with what they've done. That's a really good way to say that I'm stealing that and I'm using it. Common discoveries, common themes, complex ideas can be shared with others outside your discipline in a way that's more amplified and understandable. That creates that finding your people moment, that bonds the group together.

Maranda Bodas from IBM explains it this way. "It seems like a no brainer but it's magical to see the expertise come out and see that you're not alone." Great. You're like, "I'm going to start a community of practice. This is for me, now what?" Well, now you have to take a look at participation. How many of you created a sourdough starter from scratch? Congratulations. You are the founder of a community of sorts. What can we learn from the sourdough starter? You got to start it. You got to feed it and you got to leave it alone. It's really easy to have grand plans for your community and exactly what it is that you want it to do and how you want it to behave and how big it's going to get and how popular it's going to be.

You're going to need to start small. This is especially true if you are the founder of that community. Just like the sourdough starter, you can't predict what will organically happen with your community. The purpose might change. It might broaden or narrow. The methods of communication might evolve. There might be offshoots and side conversations and these are all good things. Doesn't mean that your community is a failure. It adds diversity and it adds richness that you couldn't have planned for if you tried but you do have to plan some things. Like we talked about, the purpose can be broad but it needs to be clear and you have to state it. If it's everything content strategy, that's your purpose, then say so.

If it's content strategy for financial services, say that, but when you go broad expect offshoots to happen and narrow subjects to expand. You have to figure out who to invite. Do you keep it in your discipline or do you want to include others? Do you want a mix of experience levels or do you want to keep it at a certain level of experience? What about industries? If it's your company, do you want to keep it within your company or do you want to expand externally? Again, with the start small it's a lot easier to invite people and add channels than it is to disinvite people and get rid of tools and channels that maybe aren't being used anymore. Then you have to think about how will your members interact.

In our research, we found about one third of community interactions centered around events. Granted a lot of those were in-person events and I haven't checked the numbers lately, but I'm guessing those have declined a little bit in the past few months. I want to talk about contractors for a minute. If you are working with contractors at your company, there are probably rules around how you interact with them for legal reasons. For instance, at LinkedIn, we cannot ask them to be a part of anything that doesn't directly relate to their project work, but it's hard sometimes because we value their expertise and we value their insights. We want to include them. It's great to include them in our community of practice but we have to do it carefully.

For instance, what we do is we include them in our weekly status meetings because it's helpful to know if their work is aligning with the work that the other UX writers are doing. We also have asynchronous channels that they can participate in or not. We also have separate meetings for our full-time crew. That way we can have discussions around things that only apply to the work that we're doing, and we're not wasting our contractors' time talking about things that don't necessarily apply to them. Ultimately just be respectful, be human, be considerate, and it'll all be okay. Back to the sourdough analogy.

Understand that no two communities of practice are going to turn out the same for a lot of reasons, but setting yourself up for structure and letting things happen is where the magic is. I found this article about creating your own sourdough and this is what they had to say about that. The flavor and texture we can get from breads and other baked goods made with wild yeast are no contest to breads made with commercial yeast. The flavors are more complex and interesting. The texture is sturdier and more enjoyable to chew. Admittedly, it got weird at the more enjoyable to chew part but I think you get the point.

There's something that happens when you let things do what they need to do. That creates something better than you ever could have planned. Nail the basics and make room for cultivation. The parameters are the nuts and bolts in making your community run. It's the size, rules, and tools of your community, and the focus of your parameters will depend on your community. We found in our research in close-knit communities where people already knew one another, the ability to be heard was top priority.

In other communities where people didn't know people that well, it might be safety or making sure there's no noise or spam. In others, cadence, agendas, and sharing might

be the most important. This means that those who are in charge of the community need to make sure that there are rules, standards, and tools to help create productive communication. This might look like allowing offshoot groups, trying a variety of channels and tools, enforcing, moderating, and encouraging, and gathering, reporting, and sharing.

This is where the rubber meets the road for your community at practice. It's the when and how of your community. Should you meet every week? Every other week? Should there be a topic or should it be freeform? What about special guests? Will you invite them? Do they have to be a part of your community in order to be a special guest? Do they have to be a part of your discipline? What about tools? Who takes notes? Do we allow cursing or off-color language? What happens if someone breaks the rules? Who's responsible for all of this? Don't assume the highest-ranking person should be in charge of all of this.

Very often, those who aren't in charge are in a better position to have an idea of what's needed. Gene Shannon from Shopify said, "We do a biweekly meet up with the team. The meetups got better when leadership stopped managing it and IC started doing it." Here's what I found to be common ways to manage the parameters. At least one synchronous meeting per month. A form of asynchronous communication like Slack or Teams, outreach to other disciplines and external teams, guest speakers, and finding a way to distribute the information.

Jen Schaefer from Netflix says, "We have a weekly design show for sharing work, and periodically we'll do a content design takeover to share our projects and some of the issues we think about that are unique to our discipline. It helps give us cross-functional exposure, invites conversation, and educates people about our discipline." In case I haven't mentioned it yet, start slowly. Don't assume you'll know what your community needs or who should run it. Someone needs to start it, obviously, but it may turn out that someone else is better at running it. That's a better idea. You'll be tempted to set up all the tools, don't. Add them as needed.

The last thing you may be waiting for permission to start your community of practice. Why did you start it anyway? What I heard more than anything else, besides everybody having meetings, is that most likely no one is going to direct you to start your own community of practice. You have to take the initiative and it will be something that exists above and beyond your so-called regular work. Maranda Bodas from IBM says, "Nobody told us to do it. We just did it." Jen Schaefer said, "The hope is just start something and momentum will happen." If someone asks just don't call it a community of practice. Say you're just getting together to talk about a few things. It's not a party, it's just to get together, but ultimately, you can't have a community without people.

In our research, we found that the most successful communities are made up of people who are respectful, motivated, like-minded but also diverse. Meaning that they are like-minded in the value of work but diverse in how they approach it, credible and supportive. As much as I love this list of attributes, it doesn't include what I think is the most important trait, and that is human. People just covers this biological thing that we

walk around in all day. Well human is the dignity that we hold and the decency we show to one another. It's acknowledging that we all have something to offer, and we all have something to learn from one another, and that we're all vulnerable.

Everyone has their own abilities and talents and challenges and constraints and they fluctuate depending on what's going on in their individual lives. There's no one real community with oh, by the way fringes because here's the secret. The fringes are the community. We have to treat every person's situation as part of the community and not outside of it. Make room for everyone. Help them find where they can find value and be the most valuable. Connect ideas, amplify voices. Find creative ways to use existing tools. Create new tools. Recycle tools. This is uncharted territory.

The goal of the community of practice is yes, about finding your purpose and learning from one another, but really, it's about connecting people with people, no matter how or when we do it. For those of you who are attending Confab for the first time, I'd like to personally welcome you to your own Confab feelings in your own community of practice. You're already making this community more enjoyable to chew.

[crying]

**Keri:** I'm crying. Do you realize everyone was crying and then you just crapped out? Please come here.

**Kristina:** You're not on screen yet. Please bring Keri on screen. Hold on. Now you're there. What is the matter with you?

[crying]

**Keri:** So many things.

**Kristina:** [unintelligible 00:23:12]

**Keri:** Here's what happened. I had to do take after take because I wanted to get that just right. I live in a downtown area in Santa Cruz. There are people walking by and just yelling things all day. I kept having to stop and I finally nailed it. Ferris, my dog is in the room when I scratch, scratch, scratch right over the tape. I just lost it. I'm like, "We're done here. I'm not doing this again." [crosstalk]

**Kristina:** I'm sorry. Did you want to feel sad and moved? No.

**Keri:** No, sorry.

**Kristina:** No Confab feelings for you.

**Keri:** I don't have Confab feelings. I just—

**Kristina:** I know, I know, I know. Ferris, where is Ferris. Can we see Ferris?

**Keri:** He is in the other room. If you would like to see Ferris, I will see if we can get him as we're wrapping up.

**Kristina:** Check with your handler, see if you can get Ferris over here.

**Keri:** I will check with Ferris's personal handler.

**Kristina:** Keri, I think I mentioned this at the top. Starting content strategy communities of practice, I have seen just be absolutely transformative within organizations. A question that has come up over and over during the last couple of days is how do I establish the value of what I do? How do I make people take content strategy seriously? How do I help people see that content is complicated and that is such a big part of what fuels the user experience? From where I sit, which I have the great opportunity to talk to a lot of people across a lot of organizations on a regular basis, this is one of the seeds of change. Not just within organizations but within towns and cities and other associations. Tell me what is your perspective on that besides absolutely agreeing with you.

**Keri:** Everything you just said, Kristina. I hear a couple of different subjects in what you just expressed. One is the community of practice of content strategy and proving out that value. Anybody that's a content strategist has been faced with this. It's still a relatively new discipline. I feel like we've been talking about it forever, but it's still considered new, which is interesting. What I tout a lot is tell the story. Tell the story, tell the story, tell the story. Then I find people who believe in that story and help them tell the story. As I talked about in the talk it's establishing that common language and that efficiency of expression and helping that see discussions elsewhere, is really the way to get [crosstalk].

**Kristina:** I think also even just starting to— Being able to share out with the other folks who are experiencing successes or might be wrangling with the same challenges. That reflection and give and take is so critical to it as well.

**Keri:** Agreed.

**Kristina:** I want to get to some questions. Here we have from Mr. Richard Ingram, who is joining us from across **[inaudible 00:26:40]**

**Keri:** I know, he asked the first question.

**Kristina:** Richard is also a longtime friend of Confab. “How can you inject new momentum when participation in a once-thriving community has started to wane?”

**Keri:** The first thing that comes to mind is finding new ways to tell the story and finding other people to help tell the story. There are all different points of view. When you bring people in who have a diverse point of view and have diverse experiences, even if they're not in your discipline, is a great way to get that momentum going again. New ways to— The talk that was— first of all, amazing talk. I was just— and I'm singing

Disney songs since then. Yes, that's a great example of a new way to tell the story and get that imagination going. Making those connections.

**Kristina:** For sure. I think too an interesting pattern that we saw back in 2012/2013/2014 when there really was huge momentum with people finding content strategy and coming together, there was a lot of activity at the local level for content strategy meetups. I think that many of those have petered out over the last couple of years. I truly wonder, too, talking about larger community practices. Seriously just bringing in other voices that they've maybe been listening to with vloggers or podcasts or people from within the city and just bringing people together over food and drink is seriously— That is so— It seems so dumb but you want to re-energize, bring people together for a party. Just call it a get-together, though. Don't call it a party. A content strategy party. Everybody wants to come to a content strategy party. Oh, is that [unintelligible 00:28:46]?

**Keri:** It's true. I'm thinking about the meetups. Again, with the new times, the daring times that we're in I mean, now we have new opportunities. I attended a meetup that was held in Seattle, that I never would have been a part of. New rules, new tools that are coming into— I mean, I would love to see how many people are at this Confab that wouldn't have made it otherwise.

**Kristina:** A lot. Yes. [crosstalk] The pandemic gives us gifts, and this is one of them. For sure, put that spin on it but I think too, and that is another— I think the places like Confab are places where people can begin to spin up organic communities of practice. I'm going to be putting out the call for that throughout the second half of our day for sure. This is a great question from Hilary Marsh. “What kind of moderation team and roles do you suggest for community of practice?”

**Keri:** Oh gosh. I think that is a great question, Hilary Marsh. I think—

**Kristina:** Thank Hilary Marsh.

**Keri:** I know, she's just so smart. It depends on several things, on how big your community is. The thing that right off the top of my head is moderating subjects and purpose. The idea of that focus on the purpose is so important when you're starting your community of practice. At the offset, that's probably a good place to start. Seeding that conversation around that purpose and moderating that, making sure that you don't stray off topic or if you do, now is a great time for offshoots. If it's a community that doesn't know one another and there's a safety issue, that's an obvious role as well.

These roles can end up taking over your entire lives. As I think, everybody has seen with all of these different methods of communication that we've got going on right now, managing all of the different channels of communication is super difficult. Finding a way to rein those in and keeping track of them is super important.

**Kristina:** I think that the clarification of roles within any community of practice is so important and also recognizing— I think especially now when people have more

availability, it's easier for them to just log into any meeting, that having those roles established is really important. Thank you, Hilary. We have time for one more question. Let's see. There are questions about helping communities continue to thrive again if they have fatigue or in getting together. I'm glad that we addressed that. There are four questions about that in here, my goodness. I don't know. I feel like we should brainstorm more about this.

Let's definitely [crosstalk]. Let's take this over to the Q&A afterwards. Literally, there are eight questions and half of them are about how do I keep people engaged? How do I keep people motivated to participate? How do I keep people moving forward within this process? I wonder if maybe setting some shared outcomes, or goals or maybe it's a matter of spreading out the meetings more so that it's only a quarterly thing and it's very structured. What do you think?

**Keri:** I think I was going to mention the exact same thing. If you're finding the motivation, the energy around it isn't there, take a look at the number of meetings that you're having, or maybe the methods of communication and, just ask, "Is this still good? What would you like to see?" Make some suggestions so that they can react to them. Otherwise, it's just like, "Here you go, what do we do?"

**Kristina:** I think also meeting through force and shame and fear. I think even the few people that are still super-engaged, really to put out a call to action like, "Hey, listen, I need you to bring three people to this." Make that your goal, bring three. Even if it's not formally within the community of practice, to your point, bring a designer, bring an engineer, bring an SEO person, or bring in somebody from HR or legal. I think that that can relate to your earlier point to really infuse new energy and life into the community.

**Keri:** Absolutely.

**Kristina:** Our time is up. I have one last thing because this is an amazing fact about you. You love Disney.

**Keri:** I do. I don't know yet.

**Kristina:** [inaudible 00:33:48] and you had a life goal that the pandemic stole from you. I just want you to share with our audience what it is.

**Keri:** I expect a little back from this and that's totally fine. Anyway, I turned 50 a couple of weeks ago and it was my life goal to visit every Disney park in one year in the world. That was our plan, in the world. We actually started in January, we went to Disney World which is in Florida and we had it all spaced out, had it all planned. How far down the list do you think that "global pandemic, all the Disney parks in the world are closed" would have been the reason why I couldn't do this? It was way down on the list.

**Kristina:** Wasn't even on the list, we had to dig the green earth to bring that up and put that on the list. It's not on anybody's 2020 bingo card. Keri, I wish you well as our

Times progress and that in the After Times, you're going to be able to fulfill that lifelong wish.

**Keri:** Thank you so much.

**Kristina:** It has fulfilled my lifelong wish to have you here on Confab. Thank you.

**Keri:** Thank you.

**Kristina:** Take care. Talk to you soon.

**[00:35:09] [END OF AUDIO]**