TRANSCRIPT – Community Conversations Episode #94

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SPEAKERS
Shannon Abram, Michelle Sneck, Jim Storer

Jim Storer 00:00
Hello, and welcome to another edition of community conversations. My name is Jim storer. I'm the founder of the Community Roundtable. And I'm joined by my capable co host, Shannon Abram. Sure. Hi,

Shannon Abram 00:12
Jim, we are back with a brand new episode for you today. And we are super excited to chat with a new community friend, Michelle Sneck. Hi, Michelle. Hey, guys,

Michelle Sneck 00:22
happy to be here.

Shannon Abram 00:24
We are so happy you're joining us today, kick us off by sharing with our audience a little bit about you, where you work in the kind of community you work with.

Michelle Sneck 00:32
I am Michelle snack, like you said, and I come to community management a little bit from a different background. So my background is actually Ecology and Evolutionary Biology. I have a PhD from rice. And I pivoted from academia and started being really interested in data science and what it can do for business and supporting actually women in business. It's just where I got started at a hackathon in Houston. And I decided to pivot to data science. And through that pivot, I actually landed a role at USAA. And when I started as a data scientist, I quickly realized that because the field is so nascent, we really required a lot of support from peers, and we just didn't quite have what I thought we needed. And so I thought that someone who could manage communities and bring people together and identify needs and kind of elevate those needs to our leadership was needed. And I somehow was able to wrangle that position. And now I do that at USAA, I work for the financial part of USA, so use a bank, but USA also has a couple of other businesses underneath it so that we also have life insurance. And

we also have property and casualty. So it's an interesting tapestry of business use cases and also dedicated data scientists who are looking to solve problems to support our members. And I'm lucky enough to be able to support them in that effort. For folks on the call

Jim Storer 01:56
today that are not familiar with the discipline of data science, can you share a little bit more about what it entails and what you do on a day to day basis?

Michelle Sneck 02:06
Sure. So as an academic, what I did was I gathered data painstakingly. So for instance, I actually sat and watched grass grow, and gathered that data, put them in Excel files, and then analyze them. And what I did to analyze them was I used mathematical modeling, and coding. And it wasn't until after I had graduated, I had realized that that approach was actually pretty akin to what people are doing at larger scales. And that's really what data science is it's taking large amounts of data and deriving insights from them are usually using mathematical modeling or sometimes complex algorithms, and also machine learning. So you can make new predictions and label new unseen data. And it took a while for my brain to move from collecting not a lot of data with a lot of effort to having lots of data at my fingertips, you can imagine what a large financial institution has in terms of data. So that was a huge mindset shift for me. But yep, data science is the the application of math to derive insights from lots of data.

Jim Storer 03:09
Thanks so much for that. So you just recently won our Community Leadership Award for rookie of the year. First of all, congratulations.

Michelle Sneck 03:19
Thank you. I didn't expect it. I was like, wow,

Jim Storer 03:24
this is really, you know, we like to recognize folks that really jumped in with both feet. And given the Rookie of the Year recognized as a community manager with less than three years in the field, it seems like it's fitting for you and it does sound like you, you really jumped right in. So you started to tell us how you got into data science. Can you tell how you got into community management community building,

Michelle Sneck 03:46
for sure. So like I said, when I landed here, as a data scientist at USAA, I noticed that there was a lot of disconnection. Like I mentioned, USAA actually has quite a few businesses beneath it. So we have bank, we have a life insurance. And we have property and casualty insurance. And I noticed that the data scientists who were serving those businesses were really disconnected. And I also noticed that a lot of our practices were really splintered and siloed. And another thing I noticed was that we didn't have maybe the best communication around how to use our technology and what best practices were in data science because it is such a emerging field. And so I actually had the opportunity to create in concert with other folks, a data science hub in the bank where we focus on technology enablement, skills, enablement and process enablement. And I took on kind of the people part of that the the community and skills development part and as a function of that I created the bank advanced analytics

community with the thought of like, Alright, we're gonna have a Slack channel, we're gonna talk we're gonna probably have a meeting, but I'm not sure what this really looks like. Well, fast forward a couple of years and I had the opportunity to create a community For the entire USAA space, so all of those data scientists and all those different businesses, which we named the data science and engineering Guild, and this basically brings together data engineers and data scientists, as well as anyone in the modeling community together to discuss emerging topics, and identify best practices and really lead the field into the future very thoughtfully and strategically. And so this community now has been established since May of this year. And I have seen such incredible benefits of having this community and including other people really leaning in and taking ownership of expanding community and maturing it. So that's what I've been up to. And I'm an accidental community manager, I didn't even know community management wasn't a thing until I actually met Alex. He's from Microsoft. And he's a great member of the community roundtable. And he's like, Hey, there's the Community Roundtable. There's lots of people doing this stuff. And there's so much information you can gain from the community roundtable that can help you, as you kind of figure out what this is. And so I was really excited to be a member of the community roundtable and have not looked back since.

Jim Storer 06:09
That's amazing. We love Alex. And I think a lot of community managers would consider themselves accidental community managers, it's almost an official job title at this point. So you mentioned slack is one of the platform or maybe it is the platform, other other platforms you're using to create community there, USA.

Michelle Sneck 06:28
Slack is the main platform, but we leverage zoom and you know, other sort of collaborative platforms like mural, but most of what we do, in terms of communication outward, and between various silos of the company is really slack.

Jim Storer 06:45
And I've got to imagine, it sounds like a lot of what you're doing within USAA may benefit from some of the tactics that shot and team use within the car network. So you may be borrowing some of those strategies for

Michelle Sneck 06:57
sure. Honestly, every time I have a question, I roll up with the car to see if you know, I'm sure someone's attacked this problem. In addition to that, I had the opportunity to host reoccurring conversations with internal community managers. And that's been amazing, because we get to ask and answer questions in real time of each other. And it's surprising how consistent our experiences are, you might think that you're alone in your quest, but really everybody is feeling really similarly and seeing similar things, despite, you know, working for very different companies. So that has also been really, really helpful.

Shannon Abram 07:33
I love hearing that. That is for any longtime listeners or longtime followers of the Community Roundtable, that was very much the genesis of us starting, you know, 14 years ago, what, where it was

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just like, as an emerging discipline, so many people sat alone in an organization and had no one to talk to like, and it's just really hard not to have peers, or to feel like, Ah, I am tackling a problem that no one else has ever tackled before. When in reality, there's hundreds of people tackling exactly the same problem. They're just not connected with each other. And so I love hearing that that is helpful for you.

Michelle Sneck 08:10
I absolutely.

Shannon Abram 08:12
So what I would like to hear about as an accidental Community Manager, which I feel like could possibly be like the title of your first album, just there's something about just something to think about. What has surprised you most in starting to do this community building work at USAA?

Michelle Sneck 08:28
How much it is needed! And how much it's not seen as something That's essential! different question because I feel very, very passionately about the importance of connection as a way of buffering folks through institutional change. So you know, we're in an unprecedented time of technological advancement. And people need to understand where they sit, and how to grapple with constant change. And I constantly argue that community is the way to do that. And I somehow was able to convince one of our VP here at USA, he's a person that helps to manage the generative AI efforts and things like that. I convinced him that community was going to be the linchpin to help the data science and engineering community really move into the future. And I think that we appreciate that notion. But to understand its impact is really difficult, because there's so many things that happen that you can't measure, even though I know the CR has has published a lot about measuring impact. It's difficult, but as a consequence of creating the data science and engineering guild, there are more and more people coming out of the woodwork to say the existence of this community has inspired me to do X. And that's something that I had never imagined happening. People are seeing the impact of togetherness and wanting to take up the mantle to help support it for a longer term. And that is so exciting to me. Also this week, I had the chance To give a talk during a kind of a learning seminar that we have every year here, it's called back to school. And I gave an impassioned talk about the importance of community as the unit of organizational change as kind of like a change management mechanism. And as a result, someone asked, why can't we have community managers beyond yourself, right? Like, why why is there only one? Why can't we make this into like a title that people can have? Because it's clearly very essential? And I'm like, why don't we so I guess the next step, an emergent property of all this work is maybe trying to argue for community management to be an expanded title, and that for more people, beside myself to have it, because I'm really the only one, one

Jim Storer 10:41
of the comments that you just made really struck me. And it's where you said how much it's needed, meaning community management and how often it's not seen as essential. I do know that a lot of community managers are nodding right now as they're listening to this podcast. And first of all, it's striking how rigid traditional hierarchical organizational structures are and how resistant they are to change. In this year state of community management, the concept of internal evangelism was critical and seen as something that organizations have to do well if they want to be successful within their their

companies. And finally, the the other idea that that came out, when you were talking about needing to, I'll use the term deputize other community managers or or create those roles, what I've seen a lot of organizations do well is create a center of excellence that gives people those skills without them necessarily needing to be called a community manager, they just become very proficient at community management as part of their job. And so then they can start to see and see opportunities for community within the organization

Michelle Sneck 11:48
who Okay, so you just gave me my next quest, I

Jim Storer 11:52
think, the topic of center of excellence. Yeah, yeah, I

Michelle Sneck 11:55
think that what's amazing about my position, and a big reason why I have stayed at USAA, beyond the great mission is the flexibility of my role, like I can kind of do whatever I want, because at least my immediate leaders find it to be very useful. And so if I wanted to start creating a center of excellence within my existing communities, and proselytize that, across the company, it could be well received, its

Jim Storer 12:19
porting the Association of American Medical Colleges who are also members of the network. And so you could certainly chat with some of the folks there, we can make those introductions.

Michelle Sneck 12:29
That'd be awesome.

Shannon Abram 12:29
Mostly, what I'm hearing is that we're gonna need a follow up podcast in about 12 months, just hear about what's happening. I'm just, I'm already looking for an update.

Michelle Sneck 12:38
I'm here for it. So

Shannon Abram 12:41
what advice do you have for a new to community professional like you that maybe community isn't in your job title, but you're definitely doing community work,

Michelle Sneck 12:49
it's a good one, pacing yourself is important, you can get excited by so many ideas, and so many opportunities that you see and get frustrated and overwhelmed. All at the same time, right? Excited, frustrated, overwhelmed, all at the same time. And you might start really opening up all of those idea packages at once and be like, What do I do with this, or you start big and get really tired? Because one thing that I think we don't talk about enough is the emotional labor of being a community manager because people see you as kind of like, the big sister of function, like people come to me with questions

about career advice, or basically anything, you know, access to a learning resource, things like that. And it does get emotionally draining. So take care of yourself, first. Pace yourself, and pick one big thing and make that happen. And that will help you gain confidence. Maybe not even a big thing, maybe just a small thing, something that's an easy lift to get your your sea legs and get positive feedback, and then go from there. Another thing that I might say to someone new is look at the data. Every time I've started a new community or a new effort, I get an understanding of what people need first. So I do a needs assessment. This was just an intuitive thing that I did come to find out that's probably a good thing to do. But I was an interview people, I would send out surveys, and I just wanted to understand, you know, do you feel connected? Do you feel like you know, what you need to do to succeed here and your job and those data are gonna really be your Northstar and help you create the strategic pillars for whatever you decide to build. So I guess in some gathered data, pace yourself quick wins. So you feel like you have some confidence and buy in from the other people in the community and take care of yourself.

Jim Storer 14:40
I love the concept of taking care of yourself because it's for sure this does have a high portion of emotional energy that's needed to be successful at this role. So love that and I wanted to ask him a little bit about USA and how you've been successful in getting so many people on board. And it reminded me of a phrase that an old soccer coach used to use, which was enthusiasm creates momentum. And I have seen your enthusiasm. So I imagine that's one of your your ingredients to success is being enthusiastic about what you're doing. But are there other ways that you've been able to get so many people on board with the concept of community? Enthusiasm

Michelle Sneck 15:22
is definitely a big part of it. Just being excited about things you're talking about definitely makes other people excited. But the other thing I think is that is really useful is having come from within the community. So you have that kind of street cred. So having been a data scientist for several years prior to kind of moving into a role where I support data scientists, I know the pain points, I honestly would know how someone who maybe is struggling to succeed in the field might respond to something. So for instance, we do a lot of migrations, and I can approach a problem being like, alright, well, if I had to do this, I would probably hack my way through it, probably not the best way. And it might work, but it might be subpar. So like, how can we avoid the dumb data scientists, as I call myself, because I honestly don't feel like I was the best. And maybe that's, that's a superpower. Because I'm able to understand how people might fall into some traps, especially with you know, maybe coming at it from a non computer science background, I think that has also been a secret sauce of being really highly empathetic with the audience that I'm serving, and having the credibility of having done the job, because a lot of people try to serve this community, but fail because they don't quite understand what's needed. And I guess the next thing that I do is I network a lot. I know people all across the enterprise, and I try to make them my best friend, not not like insincerely, but try to make connections that are meaningful, so that people when I when I need them, you know, when I when I think that they could give a talk or have a piece of knowledge that maybe might benefit someone else, I can reach out to them. And also, if I see that someone needs help, like if they're promoting an event, I'm like, Hey, do you want me to promote this for you, let me get on my Slack channels and get the word out. And so I

ingratiate, that kind of mutual trust. So I guess it came to it circuitous Lee. But I think having the trust of the community that you serve, and a sincere desire to help really allows you to have a bigger impact.

Shannon Abram 17:22
I love that. So I think I maybe know the answer. But I'm excited to hear what excites you most about your community. Right now,

Michelle Sneck 17:29
I think Communities are like organisms, probably because I'm a trained ecologist. But I think that they have the first phase of the organism is perhaps the gathering of the cells coming together. I don't know if you've ever seen a video of a slime mold, where there's all these individual organisms that come together to create something more emergent. And they come together because they know that there's a need, whether it's to feed or to spawn the if they sense it. And so at this point, we've gathered where this new thing, maybe slime mold, if you want to use that analogy, but now you have to decide what to do. And that's where we are. So I'm talking about the data science and engineering guild, we have a cadre of fellows, as we call them that are aligned to different cosa or different businesses, and they all have different roles. And we're at the stage where we've established credibility and that trust within the community. And it's kind of like, we could do whatever we wanted, we could really make a huge difference, we just have to decide what that is. And so that's what I'm really excited about is like what is that next emergent property of all of these cells coming together to create a new organism? What is this new organism going to do, because if we continue to have momentum and buy in, we could really make a huge difference.

Jim Storer 18:42
Now we're gonna have to find a video of that slime mold or an image and add that to the podcast

Michelle Sneck 18:48
page, so I can send it there's a pretty good one.

Jim Storer 18:52
We'd love that. At the conclusion of the podcast, we'd love to go into a little bit of a speed round and ask some some fun questions. And so I'm going to kick it off by asking if you're a member of Team dog or Team Cat,

Michelle Sneck 19:05
I like kitty cats. I have two.

Shannon Abram 19:08
We're also going to need you to pay the cat tax and send us pictures of those cats to include with the podcast. Okay,

Michelle Sneck 19:14
I can do that. Cat tax,

Shannon Abram 19:16
please. What are you binging right now?

Michelle Sneck 19:18
I'm a busy toddler Mom. I don't have a lot of time. But there are a couple of things. I am binging I always rewatch Star Trek The Next Generation when I feel like I need an infusion of positivity and hope for the future. So if you ever need that, this is incredible look to Picard. And then I also really love podcasts. So there's one medical mystery podcast and the latest episode was about a fungus that I actually very closely related to the fungus that I studied for my PhD, which can cause some interesting effects. When you eat it. It creates Lysergic acid and it's called ergotism. And so I recently finished a podcast about an air got outbreak in France. So those are The two things I've been really focused on, we recorded

Shannon Abram 20:02
a podcast on Tuesday, with the always delightful Helen Chen. And she had the same answer, not about the fungus. But she said that Star Trek is her like regular bench and she goes back to it and finds a lot of comfort in it. She draws all these parallels you can this podcast will be released after Helen. So if you're listening to this, you can go back listen to the last episode, how there's so many parallels to her between the space exploration they do have different worlds and different communities. And how for her directly feeds back into the community work she does. Absolutely,

Michelle Sneck 20:36
yeah, like the Federation of Planets is constantly reaching out into new parts of space, right, and trying to bring people along with them. If of course, you know, it's an alignment with the prime directive. But absolutely, like there's a lot of comfort and seeing the organization of people who are genuinely want to create connection and want to do the right thing. And I definitely identify with that. If man of Starfleet existed, I signed me up.

Shannon Abram 21:02
It is sort of the I grew up watching Star Trek because it was my dad's favorite and the idea of like the beauty of curiosity, right, which is like something I feel like maybe pieces of our world currently lack that just the connections you can get just by being genuinely interested in another person on like, a very person to person level

Michelle Sneck 21:24
100%

Jim Storer 21:24
I don't know what's going on today. Can you hear me now?

Shannon Abram 21:27
Okay. It's spooky season? And the answer is that that's

Jim Storer 21:31

true. There's definitely ghosts here today. So we started asking this question during the pandemic. And I love to hear because I still work from home. So do you have a favorite work from home hack?

Michelle Sneck 21:44
Candles, having nice smells, because we actually did have returned to office here at USA. So I have to come in three days a week. In fact, I am recording this from my cubicle as we speak. But at home, I delight in the things that I cannot do in the office, which is usually lighting, pumpkin scented candles. And so that's what I do to kind of enjoy myself.

Jim Storer 22:09
That's amazing. And we will share a link to a former colleague of ours who started a candle company who

Michelle Sneck 22:18
I'm here for that too.

Shannon Abram 22:21
There's you can learn so much more than just community on our podcast. It really is just a whole. We're just really run the gamut of topics. Next question, what's your favorite dessert?

Michelle Sneck 22:31
Oh, snap. All right. I'm going to be kind of cheesy here. But any dessert that I get to eat with my daughter, so she's a pretty picky eater, but she has discovered that she can pound down some dessert. So last night, we actually went to my parents 41st wedding anniversary, while I'm dating myself, I guess but they we ordered a tiramisu and a New York cheesecake. And my daughter is a picky eater. Sometimes she won't even like really feed herself, I have to feed her, which is probably more my problem than hers. But she just took that fork and was like going into town and it was the best thing. So I got to eat a little bit of it. But seeing her enjoy. That was the enjoyment I liked more than anything. So I guess that's my favorite dessert is the one that I get to see my daughter eat.

Jim Storer 23:16
I love that I'm beyond the kids that a picky eater stage. But when our kids were single digits, we brought them to Japan. And we came up with a new mantra in Japan because it was hard to get them food that they would like to eat. So our mantra was ice cream every day in Japan.

Michelle Sneck 23:38
Did they try mochi?

Jim Storer 23:41
They did. They loved it. But what we could find is we could find soft serve on almost every corner. And so we were not against serving them soft serve whenever they were hungry, just to make sure they were getting their internal their calories. There

Michelle Sneck 23:55

are many things we do as parents that we would be like, I would never do that. And you're like, Nope, I'm doing that. That makes a lot of sense to me right now. That's hilarious.

Jim Storer 24:03
Next question. I think he's starting to answer this. I'm interested in how you think about your community superpower. Like what is it is, is are there multiple? I

Michelle Sneck 24:13
think having been a data scientist and serving a community of data scientists definitely gives me an advantage. I talked to Alex he's in serves very similar community at Microsoft. And I know he comes from a slightly different perspective. And I can see where he brings things that are unique to the table that maybe I don't because of his background. So I think leveraging your unique background to better suit and serve the people you serve, is always a superpower. I think the other thing is that I am super nerdy. So I am able to kind of adopt the nerdom of the people that I'm serving at any given time. So I needed this data engineer to do something for me. And somehow I knew that he liked Dungeons and Dragons. So I was rolling for charisma and trying to get Critical hits so he could do something that I needed for the community. Or I have fellows who support me for the data science and engineering guild. And all we do is speak in medieval hulking theatrics. So you know, if someone you know, does something great, we're like, a hazhar. And, and the, you know, lots of oblique references to the Ring of Power, things like that. So, just making stuff nerdy and fun, and not taking yourself too seriously, because people will engage with you. They love to laugh, they love to just connect on something outside of work. And so when I do put on something, maybe that's data literacy related or tech related, making it fun and approachable. And cozy is probably something that I do best.

Jim Storer 25:46
I think that's great. Advice across the board for community builders is to don't take yourself too seriously and try to make community fun. It's not necessarily the easiest thing, given some corporate corporate cultures out there. But great advice.

Shannon Abram 26:03
Yeah, I don't know anything about data scientist, but I'm very interested in the work you do now. It's working. Final question. Who are what is your community inspiration?

Michelle Sneck 26:14
I don't want to rely on Star Trek. But that's, that's probably a big one. It's fictional, right. But I'd say the ethos of the Federation of Planets is basically to explore new worlds and make connections, bring people into the fold, if that's what they so choose, but also be respectful to the culture that exists before you arrived. And that's part of the prime directive. So one thing that I noticed, as a graduate student, I was part of a very small group of ecologist and evolutionary biologists, we had our own department, and that department was subsumed late in my PhD experience by the cell biology department. And it felt like this huge insurrection, which is Also a Star Trek movie, but where our culture was being subsumed by this external culture. And I talked to the chair of the department, the cell biology department, I was like, you know, we had these, these routines that we really care about, they might not mean a lot to you, but they're part of our culture. And I'll never forget what the chair said, she's like,

I don't have to change anything. I just have to wait for you to leave and people will forget. And I thought from then on, I would never let that happen again. So I think community is not only trying to get people on board, but also appreciating what's there. And I think that Star Trek does a good job of both right, bringing people along into something larger than themselves, but also allowing them to be uniquely them. And from that experience as a graduate student, I then in there decided that if I ever had the opportunity, like that chair did to bring people along for a ride. I wouldn't do that to them. I would honor what existed before I did,

Jim Storer 28:08
I might need to go as Captain Kirk for Halloween this year.

Michelle Sneck 28:11
I you know, I'm partial to Janeway I felt like she was pretty cool, too.

Shannon Abram 28:17
This has been a really wonderful conversation. Honestly, my biggest takeaway is that I wish we lived closer and we could be buddies. But you know,

Michelle Sneck 28:24
that's, you know, if anything from the Community Roundtable, we don't have to be in the same spot to be friends. Right.

Shannon Abram 28:33
You're right. You're giving me you're giving me know this has been a wonderful conversation, and I can't wait to be able to share this with other people. Thank you so much for taking time out of your day to chat with us. Absolutely. Thank

Michelle Sneck 28:45
you for this opportunity. It's been a blast.

Shannon Abram 28:48
Thank you, Michelle.