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## TRANSCRIPT – Community Conversations Episode #95

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

community, love, folks, professional gamer, onesie, programs, fantastic, work, connect, great, little bit, people, picnic, engineers, office, nerf guns, good, company, team, gaming

### SPEAKERS

Jim Storer, Shannon Abram, Michael Watkins

#### **Jim Storer** 00:09

Hello, and welcome to another edition of community conversations. My name is Jim store. I'm founder of the Community Roundtable. And I'm excited to be here with my capable co host, Shannon Abraham, Shannon.

#### **Shannon Abram** 00:22

We are so excited to be here today. We are recording on a gorgeous sunny Thursday from Boston, Massachusetts. And we have a brand new guest with us. Hi, Michael.

#### **Michael Watkins** 00:34

Hello, how's it going?

#### **Shannon Abram** 00:35

I am fantastic. We're having a great day. I would love if you could for our audience, introduce yourself, tell us a little bit about who you are, where you work, and then the kind of community you work with. Sure.

#### **Michael Watkins** 00:47

So my name is Michael Watkins, Jr. I'm from Baltimore, Maryland. Born and raised there, I think it's the greatest city in the world, you can fight me on that the wire is a fantastic show, you should watch it, etc, etc. I work at research innovations in Alexandria, Virginia. They are a government contractor, tech company, software company that does stuff with military folks, the government folks, and I manage the internal community here at our AI with our engineers, our people HR, that kind of stuff. So more of making sure that company is happy and a good well oiled machine when it comes to satisfaction.

#### **Jim Storer** 01:29

So I'm going to dive right in I, I want to acknowledge that your team recently won a Community Leadership Award at CR connect this year, it was for community MVP. So congratulations on that. Thank you. And we know that your organization has created a new community team in 2022 to develop and guide corporate community growth across the globe. Can you talk a little bit more about how that development has impacted your community efforts there?

**Michael Watkins** 02:04

Yes, so the community is the team is very, very new, like you said, it's 2022. And I'm actually new to this kind of community management. So I have a gaming background. And to be a little bit of a professional gamer, you should do a little bit of organization around community around certain games. And so coming here with a new community team, I don't know anything about military stuff, I don't know anything about government stuff, I just saw something and thought it would be cool to like do. And so coming here and being able to work with Helen Chen, she's an amazing person. And work alongside her and just learning more about community stuff has been fantastic. And I think coming here, just with the community that we work with, there are a lot of engineers, so they're very shy, they're very quiet, they're very reserved right to themselves. And ironically, gamers can be the same way, right. And so being able to kind of take that experience from the gaming world and to here has been fantastic. And the amount of stuff that we've done, when it comes to just getting people on the same track has been great. So I'm more of the community engagement kind of person. And so I'll be the person that's like, hey, you know, come to this happy hour, or like, Hey, you like Star Wars, it's talking about Star Wars, that kind of thing. Today of events, and we've kind of had a fantastic year, I would say when it comes to, I guess, not necessarily post pandemic, but coming out of the pandemic and getting people back to the office and then dealing with remote people and people that are here and getting people together and stuff like that. So we've been doing events across the United States, even across the globe, just trying to get people that work at REI to kind of connect with each other and feel like an actual community with like, happy hours. Happy hours are a fantastic and easy way to get people to kind of connect with you, especially engineers, because then they start talking and go like Oh, I, I wouldn't have talked to you otherwise. But now I know that you're a cool person, you'd like some of the same things that I like, but I wouldn't have done it if it wasn't for this beer in my hand. Which is great. And then stuff like excellent contests with different offices and stuff like that. So we've done a lot from the employee engagement side just to make sure that they are having a fun time that they love being here. And so we actually just finished onesie Tuesday observed on a Wednesday, which is where most people around the company are working on onesie and so little fun things like that get people engaged and really help people kind of stay motivated and go hey, like you feel love so I'm going to do my job very well.

**Jim Storer** 04:45

So I'm, I have so many questions based on what you just shared. And so first of all, I I would love to know what you are a professional gamer in that sense. It's incredible. And I know because Shannon and I both reacted at the same time when you said that and then I'm also fascinated by this. onesie Wednesday. And what was your latest onesie?

**Michael Watkins** 05:14

Yeah, so I used to be a professional gamer in the game called SoulCalibur. Six, it is a fighting game. I love fighting games, if you're familiar with like Mortal Kombat, or Tekken, or Street Fighter, it's kind of like that genre of games. And so, during the pandemic, even before the pandemic a little bit, was trying to figure out what I wanted to do. Gaming was something that was fun to me and gave me it's kind of on the rise as far as a career started to try. It was fun for the first two years. But when something becomes your, when your passion becomes your job, you're kind of like, yeah, I really want to do this. It's like not as fun. I use video games to kind of like, enjoy myself and escape. So having, like, depend on whether I did well or not was it was very draining, and the money was not there. So that is, my boy. Don't be a professional gamer. But I did I wore penguin. I like penguins. Penguins are great. They're cool animals. And I had a penguin, I had choices of like a penguin, a dragon. Duck, a bear, but a penguin matches my shoes.

**Jim Storer 06:27**

I think we're gonna need to get a photo of that to put with the podcasts for folks who are visual.

**Michael Watkins 06:32**

Sure, I've got photos I got you if you want one.

**Jim Storer 06:37**

And we also need to recognize Helen Chen, you mentioned Helen and and how she's helped you kind of grow into that, that role. And I think we've been working with Helen for many years and seeing her continue to evolve in her role as a it's almost like she's a community Jedi use the Star Wars reference earlier. But she really she's a Jedi Master.

**Michael Watkins 07:07**

Yes. I can talk about her for hours, I think she's a fantastic person, fantastic friend, fantastic person to, to work with and just learn from, I think it's our dynamic is really cool, because we're, we're a lot of real estate pieces, but a lot of things. Which is really great. But also, she's just got like a wealth of experience and a wealth of knowledge that I get to kind of just take from and just learn from her. But also I get to teach a little bit of thinking from the younger generation to, right, there is a little generation gap. And so it's nice to be able to see things from both worlds in the way that we've worked together is pretty magical, I would say. And I've been blessed to have an opportunity to work with her and get to know her. And she's helped my community journey, like tremendously, I think, I don't think I would be the person who I am in the community space if she wasn't there. 100%.

**Shannon Abram 08:01**

mean, I'm always happy to meet another member of the Helen Chen fan club, because she's just, I feel like we actually talk about her on this podcast most of the time. She's just She's wonderful. Yeah, 100%, you've mentioned it a little bit about how you like to focus on community engagement. You mentioned some of the programs you do. And then in talking to you and and talking to Helen, that connect this year, you have so many interesting programs that other companies, I haven't heard them run. So I would love if you can share some not even maybe the most successful, but your favorite programs to give other community people some ideas.

**Michael Watkins 08:39**

Sure, well, if you don't have happy hours, you should do happy hours, it's great. It's very easy, very low maintenance. And it will be probably better than you expect. Some of our programs have a lunch program for pupils in the offices just allow people to kind of give them a reason to come to the office because nowadays, with with the pandemic and everything and people are like I don't want to leave my office because I gotten so used to work from home. But if you do come in the office, you know, you kind of get the benefit of, hey, we're gonna pay for your lunch and it's great. That happens every single week. Some of the other programs we have, like I mentioned Axe Throwing have, we bought every single office and axe throwing kit. So that way they can have their own plastic access to anything in the office. And we had a contest about it too, which is fantastic. We are a bunch of nerdy engineers here. And so we do things like celebrate Pi Day, which is on March 14 3.14. And not only do we bring in pi, we have people showcase their Raspberry Pi projects. Right and I think a lot of lot of our programs are catered towards our audience. We have a lot of nerdier engineers, so if we get them a chance to show their geek side, they take it every single time Got Nerf guns in the office that may or may not have been fired a couple of minutes ago. But just different things that people people can kind of get into. Obviously, we're working on things like ERGs, and things like that to kind of the more serious things, but a lot of a lot of people here, by saying that they're into, we've got four cyber folks, they do a 5k Every, every year. So those folks are connected, different places have different picnics that they kind of go to and even for the geolocation, so because we're getting up there in a smaller company, but it's still a decent chunk of people. We'll have things for folks that are in concentrated areas. So one of the big things is Colorado is an area that we're growing in. And so there's a bunch of people there. And so actually, just recently, about a week ago, I was in Colorado to meet those folks. And to have them and a gathering to kind of see how they were doing and, and have the temperature of their happiness. And it was it was great. It's fantastic. I got to go to Colorado and see a real mountain for the first time. Because you're on the East Coast, you see like mountains, but they're not real mountains until you got to like an actual place that has actual mountains. Right? That's just me. But just going out there and see how they're doing was was fantastic. And keeping them up to date about what's going on. We haven't store has been great. And then we also do a little bit of educational stuff, too, right. So right now on our platform is slack. And not everyone understands how to how to use Slack. So we'll have programs to kind of be like, hey, I'll teach you how to use Slack. I'll teach how to do this, etc, etc. and things like that. So that's just like a little bit of the programs and things that we do here. We do a lot more, but I could sit here all day and talk to you about them. And I couldn't do that if I remember them but I don't know. off top my head. So I would just stop here. Well,

**Shannon Abram 11:55**

I don't think they're paying you to recruit people, but maybe they are paying you to recruit. I love my job. And I don't know if I'm in like the Nerf gun stage of my career anymore. But I really want to be it really does.

**Jim Storer 12:15**

Thinking about Nerf guns and if a battle broke out at the office, I think all Michael on my team given his history and gaming.

**Michael Watkins 12:23**

Yeah, you know, I've got there's I've got I've got you covered Trust me, I've got the ammo, isn't it with the extra guns are Nerf guns. Trust me, we got you covered.

**Jim Storer** 12:37

So kind of thinking about your team and other folks that are out there listening are building out their community teams, I wonder if you've got advice, as a new community team is coming together on how they can really make a difference. At their organization. It I mean, it sounds like kind of engaging with the population is one of your, your key attributes. But I'd love to hear more.

**Michael Watkins** 13:05

Yeah, so I think when it comes to just being successful, I think one from the back end, you got to have a structure plan in place, right? I think doing something without structure is difficult. And I think just understanding what you want to do and and figuring out how you want to do it is the most important. And the second part is you got to just do stuff, right? I think a lot of a lot of the times people will get worried about doing it right? And doing it like perfect the first time. And that's not necessarily the case all the time. But the thing that I've learned and is that if you do something and get it wrong, that's okay. Because now you have the tools to get it right. And that's so important. That's kind of the model that we live by here. And already I especially Helen and I we just like to do stuff and go oh, that's stuck. Okay, cool. Why did it stick? This didn't stick. Okay, why did it not stick? Right? And even through those ways, if you're not a people person, or you don't like to kind of mingle with with folks, that is another way to get to know your audience as well. Understanding what what they do what, what they like, what they don't like, et cetera, et cetera. I think that's super important to just kind of get out there and just start trying things. I'm not saying like, you have to build Roman A, right because that's not how this works. But just don't be afraid to don't be afraid to fail and then go like, Oh, that was a bad idea. Okay, now I from that experience, I now know what can work or this is a fantastic idea. Let's keep doing that. And then just understanding your audience and getting to know like, the company and the people that are here. From the moment I joined, they were like, yeah, these people are nerdy. You gotta do some extra legwork to get them. And really all I had to do was just go Oh, you like Chewbacca, we have someone were Chewbacca ones. That's why I bring up Star Wars because like, oh, Do you like Star Wars? Yeah, like Star Wars is my favorite episode. Whoo. Like, it's, it's interesting. And it's it's crazy how even the quietest quietest of engineers can start talking when you find a topic that they're interested in, right, that goes for everyone. Right? And so, yeah, I guess having a structured plan or idea. Once you have that, being a, be not afraid to kind of go in between the lines and just kind of just try things, and then continue to get to know the people that you are kind of serving, right. I think when it comes to community management, I think that as I'm serving people, I'm my job is to make their lives easier. My job is to make their their time here. Fun, right? And so kind of having that mindset kind of puts me in a way of like, okay, what do they need, what do they not need, etc, etc, and kind of helps me understand that better and do my job better.

**Shannon Abram** 15:55

I think that's such great advice, because it's like, I'm not going to be able to articulate this properly. You hear people say, like, you need to meet your community where they are. And I think a lot of the times they mean, like, Oh, if they're on LinkedIn, you should be on LinkedIn, or whatever. But you're doing that in a much more like profound and empathetic way saying, like, how can I connect with you as a

human? And then that you can use those connections to then help improve the jobs they're doing? And I just think that's something that everyone needs to hear.

**Michael Watkins 16:31**

You Yeah, I think it's, I've kind of always thought of people as human beings. I mean, everyone's human being right. But even in the gaming world, people kind of it's, it's a very foreign concept of people are cheated by their skill, or people are cheated by what they do. But I don't know. Like, do you get hungry, I get hungry. People get hungry. So you are human, just like me, right? So let's connect on that level. Even if it's talking about like, what do you have for breakfast today? That's something now I know what you like. And maybe you have something that I don't like, so then I can make fun of you for it. And that's how the connection starts.

**Shannon Abram 17:06**

I'm, I'm always hungry, Michael. So yes, you could, literally always thinking about my next meal. So it sounds it's what you've done in a short amount of time is so incredible, I would love to hear what are you in the team thinking about, like 2024 is right around the corner, which is terrifying. Like, what are you guys thinking about for the future?

**Michael Watkins 17:27**

Yeah, so for the future, we've got more people coming to the company, the company is growing at a very, very good rate. And so looking at connecting with more folks that remote, and those geo locations, and also focusing on the folks that live in the middle of nowhere, because those people do exist too, and trying to figure out better ways to kind of connect with them and make them feel as home or make them feel like it's home for them. community platform is something that we were looking at in 2024. Right now, Slack is great. It's not a good community platform, or community back home period, really. So looking to kind of migrate into something in 2024. We just had a summit with our team just to kind of figure out what we want to do for 2024. And how we can better help the organizations that work with us organizations that don't work with us and things like that. So that's a little snapshot of kind of what to do more events, got some feedback that folks really do like this idea of a picnic, and I say picnic, but I went to a football game in Texas, and that was their picnic. And if you know anything about Texas, everything's bigger in Texas, just like the football, it was an insane experience. So just continuing to kind of meet people where they meet people where they are the people, like just continue to connect with the community, I think is the main way. And hopefully 2024 is a good year, gotta streamline some processes, make them better. And giving more folks the opportunity to start things up themselves. I think one of the things that is as community managers tend to feel like you have to do everything. But if you give people the structure to be like, hey, I want to run this group, hey, I want to do this and give them the ability to do so. It makes them happy. And it makes our lives easier. So just kind of those things I think are the big goals for 2024.

**Jim Storer 19:40**

I think I can speak for both Shannon and I and just say that we're available for the next picnic in Texas. That sounds like a lot of fun. Yeah, I

**Michael Watkins 19:48**



mean you want to come

**Jim Storer** 19:52

so we're kind of getting near the tail end of the podcast and at the end of these we love to go a little bit of more casual and we've got a series of questions we'd like to ask in a speed round type format, so I'll kick it off with Team dog or Team Cat.

**Michael Watkins** 20:11

Cat 100% 100% Cat.

**Jim Storer** 20:13

Oh, amazing. I'm Team dog right now. I used to be Team Cat.

**Michael Watkins** 20:20

I had a cat. I got my first cat two years ago, never looked back.

**Shannon Abram** 20:25

I like you didn't even hesitate and your cat appreciates that about you.

**Michael Watkins** 20:29

I mean, it's her house. I'm just living in it. So

**Shannon Abram** 20:33

that's really, you know, who's in charge? What are you binging right now?

**Michael Watkins** 20:39

Um, right now and binging? I don't know if folks are aware of Invincible the TV show The comic book show on Amazon Prime. I have not watched it yet. And I saw the first episode because season two was coming out. And I was like, this has to be the best first episode I've seen in a long time. So invincible is the thing that I'm into right now.

**Jim Storer** 21:02

Amazing. I was told about the bear, which is on Hulu. And we're almost finished with that. And so it's been it's been a fun ride. During the pandemic, we all were forced to work from home and some of us continue to work from home and I wonder if you've got a favorite work from home hack.

**Michael Watkins** 21:25

Favorite work from home hack? Getting up and turning on my laptop two minutes before I don't know what the heck, I guess it's just like a cool thing. But I do have a nice since you know gaming I have a nice setup at my house. So being able to kind of have it's like have four monitors. So I'm like a hacker man kind of thing. I don't know if that's a natural hack, but I do I do like being able to just go boop okay, I'm good. Let's go. Not very many people can kind of just get up and go. So I That's my hack. I guess get better rest or sleep. I don't know.

**Shannon Abram** 22:07

I'm once again jealous. I have two small children and they rise with the sun.

**Michael Watkins** 22:13

And my cat does too.

**Shannon Abram** 22:17

What is your favorite dessert?

**Michael Watkins** 22:20

Oh, Cookies, cookies and milk or vanilla ice cream with the warm brown underneath. Love every time Kirby lays very good. Now you get my wheelhouse I love dessert can be lay is one of my favorite desserts as well. And he flung fondness good. I like anything green tea related. And green tea is not a dessert. But macaroons are and so there's a green tea macaroons are like a green tea. Mochi is just amazing.

**Jim Storer** 22:54

Or you hit a lot of highlights there. Like, I think I might need to go out for lunch slash dessert later. Yeah,

**Michael Watkins** 23:03

me too. I will join you on that.

**Jim Storer** 23:06

What's your community superpower?

**Michael Watkins** 23:09

Um, community superpower is I tend to have the ability to get along with everyone, which is weird. I tend to just be happy, go lucky and go. Okay, cool. This is what you need to do. Okay, cool. So what you need to do, and build connections with people that are like, how did you talk to that guy? I don't understand how that person works. And I go, I don't know, I just let him talk he's asked questions about so I guess that's my community to empower.

**Shannon Abram** 23:35

Me it also sounds like maybe you're just a good person. I try to be I tried. Yeah, not everyone does, though. That's like, something important to remember. Who are what is your inspiration in your community work.

**Michael Watkins** 23:51

Um, I don't necessarily have a specific inspiration in my community work. I think that I kind of got into community work, because in life, I've had people come find me and mentor me and help me out of the blue because they saw something in me. And so my goal is to just give back in any way that I can't. And so for me, doing community work. And community management is a way that I can get back to a lot of people but also get to build relationships with them just as people have has done to me. And I



truly wouldn't be the same person that I am today without those people impacting my life. And so I hope that in my community journey, I get to impact someone, the way that I've been impacted throughout life. So amazing.

**Shannon Abram** 24:42

It sounds like you're super busy. And it sounds like it's super fun to work with you. And I just I want to thank you for taking the time to chat with us this morning, Michael. Yeah,

**Michael Watkins** 24:53

thank you for having me. I really appreciate it.

**Jim Storer** 24:57

I just imagine you've got a sign that you put up with You're on calls it says no Nerf gun war right now or something because yeah, relatively quiet during the conversation. Yeah

**Michael Watkins** 25:09

I kind of got a private room because people are moving around and doing stuff you know they've got coming back from from onesie yesterday. It was very noisy days. So I kind of found me a nice little corner nice little silenced area was able to talk to you guys. So

**Jim Storer** 25:28

awesome. Thank you so much. Thank you.