Too many cooks spoil the broth

How to (not) burn your fingers in an open source project

Florian Effenberger

Speck&Tech 90 “It takes a village”
Trento, 11 November 2026

Who am I?

- Ciao! :) I'm Florian!
- free software enthusiast since 2004
- co-founder of **LibreOffice** and **The Document Foundation**
- unexpectedly turned hobby into profession

Viewer's discretion

for the purpose of this talk:

free software =

open source

Part I:

From user to contributor

Breathing the community spirit

- early contact with computers, thanks to dad
- online since 1991 (BBS and later FidoNet)
- born in Germany, lived in Belgium 1987-1992
  - first contact with **international "communities"**
  - learned English (and a bit of French) early on

It all started with a router...

- 2001: DSL was bleeding edge technology
  - my former school could not afford a router
  - *“Let’s just make one ourselves, can’t be that hard!”*
  - only possible because **software and knowledge** were available to everyone **freely and free of charge**
  - documentation, forums, help **from the community** *”do it yourself and learn from it”*

...and a word processor!

- 2002: OpenOffice.org 1.0 was released
- 2004: my first trade show!
  - just “try and do” to **explore skills and talents**
  - flat hierarchies to **try out things uncomplicated**
  - I was **“taken by the hand”**, given trust and responsibility
  - **full and respected community member** from day one
  - my **opinions and contributions** did matter

Volunteering → learning → engagement

- 2004-2010: volunteer at OpenOffice.org
- 2006: my first article!
  - based on my **experiences** from school
  - contact thanks to **colleague** from OpenOffice.org
  - 130+ articles from 2006-2014
- 2008-2014: consulting for FLOSS companies

Of associations and foundations

- 2005-2015: OpenOffice.org Deutschland e.V.
  - **nonprofit** and legal founder of TDF
  - founding member, **board** & supervisory board
- 2010: LibreOffice and The Document Foundation
  - statute co-author, 2012-2014 **chairman** of the board
  - since March 2014 **executive director**

Part II:

What's this "community", can I eat it?

Thoughts on communities

An apartment is just a physical place. It eventually becomes home when people **breathe, love, discuss, argue, celebrate and share** it. In the same way, an open source project eventually becomes a true **community thanks to its members**.



Thoughts on communities

Being active in a free software project is about **much more than "just" code**: It's about **people, trust, friendship** – and making the best out of that combination to **work on the same goal**.

Thoughts on communities

“a group of **people** with a shared **identity** and joint **interests**”

(loosely based on a German Wikipedia article)

How to define an open source community?

- legal, *e.g. certain licenses*
- technical, *e.g. open repositories*
- tax/financial, *e.g. nonprofit*
- organisational, *e.g. as an association*

Let's try a different approach!

equivalent of **humanitarian** projects, implemented through **software and technology**, for the **good of society**, with **higher goals** in mind

One example



Next Decade Manifesto

For the past ten years, the OpenOffice.org community has developed, supported and promoted the world's leading open-source office productivity suite. We have attracted the support of tens of thousands of individuals and corporate bodies during this period.

We now call on all our supporters to follow us into the next phase of our development, as we become an independent Foundation.

Our Values

WE COMMIT OURSELVES:

To eliminate the digital divide in society by giving everyone access to office productivity tools free of charge to enable them to participate as full citizens in the 21st century

WE REJECT:

The ownership of office productivity tools by monopoly suppliers which imposes a de-facto tax on global electronic free speech and penalises the economically disadvantaged

What makes a good community?

- **many ways** to contribute
  e.g. development, documentation, localization, QA
- **open for everyone** to contribute and use
  independent of e.g. age, gender, profession, language
- **share** knowledge and **support** newcomers
- be **motivated** and **motivate**



Fun Project

LibreOffice is one of the friendliest and fastest-growing projects in the free and open source software world.

More about us and our values



Fantastic People

LibreOffice is about more than software. It's about people, culture, creation, sharing and collaboration.

Join us today!

It’s like cooking food as a group...

- you enjoy **working together**
- you learn from your **mistakes**
- you **share knowledge**
- you have adventurous **interest and excitement**
- everyone contributes **what they’re best at**
- you **motivate** others to contribute and **teach** them
- **everyone benefits** from the result, and it can be **shared**



Part III:

How to (not) burn your fingers

The anthill



The human factor

- “**robust discussion**” and “**strong characters**”
- **different people** might go in **different directions**
- not all **goals** are mutually exclusive, but some are

When politics come to play

Ongoing professionalisation

Growing organisations, increase in donations

When politics come to play

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Commercial value

Brand recognition, reputation, trademark value

When politics come to play

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"Politics"

Keeping the balance

Core project interests

FLOSS values and ideals
Community spirit
Independence
Conflict-free decisions

Interests and necessities

Funding
Commercial ecosystem
Bureaucracy
Personal interests

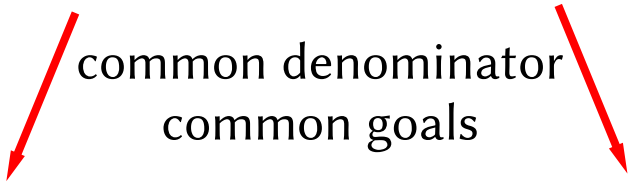
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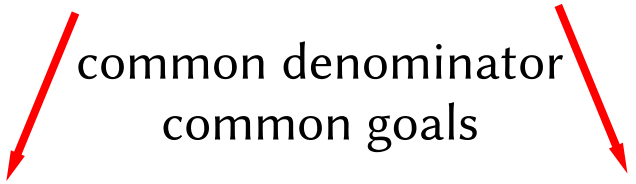
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PROBLEMS

Some common mistakes (to avoid)

- stay **isolated** and don't interact with other communities (*"reinventing the wheel"*)
- public fights and **attacks** (quite common!)
- "**disrespect** for work"
- dishonesty and **hidden agendas**
- underestimate **internationality**

Some common risks (to account for)

- **contributors** change or lose jobs, retire
- **inflation** affects sponsors and donors
- companies change **business strategy**
- “competition” for volunteer time

Organizational challenges

- lack of **competent** leadership
- too little **cooperation** in the leadership
- missing **professional structure**
- unclear **responsibilities**
- don't forget: **completely new tasks** may await you in additional areas

What happens in the FLOSS world

2026 OSI Elections Update

Pausing the 2026 Board Election Cycle to Improve How OSI Selects Directors and Hears the Community

Over a decade ago, OSI introduced an experiment in non-profit governance: a public board election process. We wanted the board composition to be more representative of the broad community we serve, and this process seemed like a real, practical way to accomplish this. The intent was to create a structured feedback mechanism for the community to help inform board member selection and to broaden stakeholder participation around who leads this organization.

After observing fourteen years of experience and process iteration, and after closely reviewing community feedback and concerns about the most recent election cycle, I presented an unsolicited proposal to the OSI board on January 17 and asked them to consider two things: 1) to not hold the Spring 2026 elections when scheduled in order to 2) take time to revisit our current governance processes. After much discussion and thoughtful consideration, the board voted in favor of both actions.

What happens in the FLOSS world

Update on work to improve governance at the FSF

by Free Software Foundation — Published on Mar 25, 2021 11:52 PM

Summary of actions from the board and voting member meetings of Thursday, March 25, 2021:

The voting members unanimously agreed to elect a union staff member, selected by the FSF union staff, to be a full voting member and director. The first such representative will be elected as soon as the staff chooses one. The FSF will adopt by-law changes to implement this as a requirement going forward.

The board of directors is soliciting proposals from qualified consultants to assist in creating a transparent, formal process for identifying candidates and appointing board members who are wise, capable, and committed to the FSF's mission. The FSF intends to rewrite the by-laws in a way that binds the organization to transparency in its choice of directors. This process will establish ways for FSF associate members and supporters to meaningfully contribute to the discussion. The board is looking for proposals to be received by Friday, April 2, 2021. Please email info@fsf.org with the subject "Director Transparency Engagement" for details.

FSF president Geoffrey Knauth announced, "I commit myself to resign as an FSF officer, director, and voting member as soon as there is a clear path for new leadership assuring continuity of the FSF’s mission and compliance with fiduciary requirements."

The board of directors will continue this work at its next meeting, scheduled for Sunday, March 28.

What happens in the FLOSS world

[VOTE] Approve procurement policy and development agreement, revoke previous technical budgeting procedure

Board Discuss decision



floeff 1 Nov. '24

Hello,

based on discussions with the board, hereby the following vote is proposed:

1. The board approves the initial version of the procurement policy and the development agreement 40 written by Carlo Piana, puts them in place, and makes them mandatory for any future development tenders with immediate effect.

2. The board commits itself to work on a second iteration of the documents, based on experiences with application of the first version.

Nov. 2024

1/47
Nov. 2024

Ten thoughts on community leadership

- Cooperation
- Commitment
- Variety
- Delegation
- Responsibility
- Social
- Diversity
- Coordination
- Trust
- Reward

Take home messages

- contributor time is **invaluable**
- widen your view and **redefine your own position**
- **show appreciation** and respect
- **find compromises** and common denominators
- grow a **“thick fur”**
- delegate
- **things you don’t understand can still be important**

Thank you very much!
Any questions?

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Further reading:
https://effenberger.org/en/texts/ten-thoughts-on-community-leadership/
https://effenberger.org/en/texts/what-do-open-source-and-cooking-have-in-common/
https://effenberger.org/en/texts/what-the-open-source-community-means-to-me/