Hard Conversations on mailing lists

Enrico Olivelli - ASF Member, member of a few PMCs
Something about me

- I love Open Source and the Apache Software Foundation
- PMC member in Apache ZooKeeper and Apache Pulsar
- Currently PMC Chair of Apache Curator and Apache Bookkeeper
- Committer in Apache Maven
- ASF Member
- Contributor of few OSS projects out of the ASF, like HerdDB.org and Pravega.io
- Working at DataStax, 99% of my day is on OSS software: Apache Pulsar and LangStream.ai
Agenda

● Community over Code
  ○ Apache projects are communities of volunteers
  ○ How does a project look like and work
● Mailing lists
● Hard Conversations
● Hard Conversations + Mailing lists
● Suggestions
Community over Code

- Apache projects are communities of people
- (In theory) We are all “volunteers”
- Distributed all across the world
- Different cultures (but we use English)
- Different time zones
- Hobbyists, Professionals...
Anatomy of an ASF project - assets

Each ASF project has:

- Some source code somewhere
  - 1 or more repositories
- A Website
- Releases repository
- Mailing lists (user, dev, private, security...)
- An issue tracker (JIRA, GitHub...)
- Other means to communicate (slack, video calls...)
- No bindings with particular companies/vendors
Anatomy of an ASF project - people

You can see people with different roles:

- Users
- Contributors (aka “developers”)
- Committers
- PMC members
  - PMC = “Project Management Committee”

https://www.apache.org/foundation/how-it-works/#roles
Interactions in a project

Typical cases of interactions in a project:

- Support users
- Discussions about problems and solutions
- Designing new features
- Patches (PRs) reviews
- VOTE on releases
- Announcing news
- Discussions about the community
- Project Management Committee discussions
Synchronous Communications (chat...)

Characteristics of chats:

- You must be online
- Quick and short answers
- Hard to catch up and participate to discussions
- Hard to refer to previous answers

Ideal for:

- Chatting!
- Quick responses to questions
- Direct Messages
- Pinging people
Mailing lists and communication

Mailing lists, very old style! But still great

Why they are the preferred way:
- They are asynchronous
- They are easily archived and linkable

https://www.apache.org/foundation/how-it-works/#management
Asynchronous is better!

Why email threads are preferred:

- Folks from different time zones
- People participate in their “spare time”
  - You are not always “online”
  - You can catch up when (and if) you want
- When you write you “slow down”
  - More time to think
  - More time to read and understand the questions and the answers
  - English is not the mother language for everyone
- Ideal for:
  - Taking decisions
  - Long discussions
  - Answers to non-trivial questions
  - Announcing news
Community = Shared goals?

- People are part of a community share “something”
- In an ASF project this is a “Project”, some “code”
- But we have different goals:
  - Fun
  - Education/Study
  - Profit
  - Looking for a job
  - Personal fame
Hard Conversations

- Nobody can “take decisions” by themselves
- Different goals and culture -> Conflicts
- Examples:
  - I don’t like your solution!
  - Is this really a problem or not?
  - Is this a security issue or not?
  - Is something making the project no longer “vendor neutral”?  
  - He is too picky in his reviews!
Examples

Sorry, can’t disclose much in a public conference 😥
Suggestions for good discussions

- Be objective, not personal
  - Keep feelings out of answers ("slow down")
  - Use only technical points
- Provide enough context to let the others understand your points
- Ask for more context if you don’t understand the question or problem
- Don’t be shy, speak up and share your point of view ("IMHO", "my 2 cents...")
- Don’t be aggressive
- Reach consensus before acting on the shared assets of the project
Suggestions for good discussions

- No more than 2 emails on a thread per day
- If you feel insulted by an answer, stop for a few hours and re-read with new eyes, you will probably see positive aspects you completely missed the first time (because focused on the bad feeling)
- In general, **people have good intents**, didn't think they could be read as aggressive
- Be concise:
  - “I’m sending you a long letter because I don't have time to write a short one”

Thank you!

https://www.apache.org/foundation/how-it-works/

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