

Recap of 9/18/12 Senior Fellows and Friends Event, "The Business of Community"

Dear Senior Fellows and Friends,

Last week we had a stimulating discussion with Rachel Happe, co-founder of The Community Roundtable, and Ayelet Baron, a 2012 addition to The CR's leadership team. They traveled to the DC area from Boston and the San Francisco Bay Area to establish new relationships and further a new [Social Executive Study](#).

Rachel hit my radar last year through her seminal post entitled [Communities - The New Strategic Imperative](#). If you're grappling with information overload, read that post. A remarkable statement made last week was, "Relationships and people are becoming the weak link" – we have a choice between adopting Lewis Carroll's Red Queen's race (*here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place*) and realizing that we are now in an environment of abundance rather than of scarcity. I've read that Rachel actually prefers the label "networked" to "social." In my opinion, neither quite conveys the usefulness of the work this group doing, or the promise that such work holds for government.

Some of you probably wondered why we focused on "the business of community." After all, most of us work in government. Government and business are different – right? Well, the Pew Internet & American Life Project says that two-thirds of American internet users are now on social networking sites. (Are [Mommy Bloggers](#) on your radar?) In light of the precipitous decline of public perception of government, is it too much of a stretch to think that some citizens may have begun comparing the responsiveness of business icons that converse fluently with them with the responsiveness of government agencies that don't?

"Social" anything is a relatively new phenomenon; many organizations in every sector aren't even in the game yet. But when I read an April 27th *Federal Times* finding that 66% of Americans surveyed do not believe the federal government addresses people's needs, I began to wonder if government were being compared along this dimension of relationship and found wanting. Conversation enables people to feel heard, understood and valued, even when it doesn't solve their problems. Some agencies have been making headway (my current ED faves are @FAFSA and [Arne Duncan Gave Me Homework!](#)), but there's a ways to go if we are to remain in good standing as a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Heard that night:

"It's about *understanding* people, not just knowing millions of people."

"My Library Science background taught me to do question negotiation: What's the real question? What are you really looking for, and what does success look like?"

“We have to have the comfort level to say, I don’t yet know.”

[Alex Tremble](#), an original thinker we’ll be hearing more from, said later:

This session was one of the most informative discussions I have had the pleasure to be a part of. I can undoubtedly state that the discussion was made even more beneficial by the extremely diverse group in attendance. The session began with participants sharing what they would do with social media, what benefits their organization would realize, and what challenges they might face incorporating social media into their organizations. The group identified a number of positive outcomes to incorporating social media (e.g., creating a positive perception for the organization, increasing usage and new hire diversity, and engaging the community) and a number of the challenges that might be encountered (e.g., political issues within the government, and lack of resources).

Rachel’s final point of the evening was that social technologies allow community management teams to scale relationships, even in heavily regulated environments. Discovering how to do that well in government – how to talk constructively with each other on a large scale – is worthy of our attention.

This discussion attracted two seasoned government community managers and a university professor who is in DC for a year to research cloud-based assistive technologies for people who have cognitive disabilities, as well as the GovDelivery/GovLoop engagement services team. Each helped make the discussion even more relevant and productive, and we hope to see them again.

Participant affiliations were as follows:

Consultant, IT Workforce Issues
Consumer Finance Protection Bureau
Defense Security Service
Department of Education
Department of Homeland Security (TSA and FEMA)
Department of State
Department of the Interior
Environmental Protection Agency
GovDelivery
Office of Management and Budget
Partnership for Public Service
The Community Roundtable
Pastry Cook
University of Colorado

A generous spirit of learning and collegiality was fostered and enjoyed by all. Please consider joining us in the future.

Regards,
Kitty Wooley