

Introduction



THEMES

- Business Models
- Convergence & Decision-Making
- Other Similar Communities
- Corporate Sponsorship
- Coordinator Effort
- Emotional Information
- Partiality & Complementarity
- F2F/On-Line

(ACTION IMPLICATIONS)

- Business Model Committee
- Support Convergence
- Encourage Local Activity
- Invite Other Stories

STORYTELLING PROCESS

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

- Comment/Add To This Story
- Help The Governance Transition
- Invite Others' Stories

Welcome

This is a piece of the story of CPsquare, as told during a conference call on July 22, 2003 -- with a particular focus on the perspectives of Etienne Wenger and Bill Snyder, and as it turned out, CPsquare's business model. The original impetus was a session in the bar at Chaminade during CPweek in May, 2003. Participants in the call were: John Smith, Bill Snyder, Joann Gumaer, Brian Foster, Ross Wirth, Jim Palmer, Deborah Plumley, Etienne Wenger, Elizabeth Doty and Estee Solomon-Gray.

If the story had a headline, it might be one of these:

- *** It's the Business Model, Stupid ***
- *** This Founder is Exhausted ***
- *** There's No Way We Can Fail! ***

Why read this story?

This story should take about 10 minutes to read. You will find it worth your time if you are:

CURIOS ABOUT: History of CPsquare, Etienne Wenger, Bill Snyder, Estee Solomon Gray, John Smith, Setubal, storytelling

GETTING ORIENTED TO: community coordination, sponsorship, governance

LOOKING FOR EXAMPLES OF: business models, evolutionary design, self-organization, transformation phase, founders letting go, top-down, bottom-up, coordinator effort

LOOKING FOR THE REASONS BEHIND: membership pricing, governance committee, internationalization, volunteer model, working groups

ASSESSING THE VALUE OF: business models, vision

RESEARCHING: evolutionary design, self-organization, community transitions, business models, internationalization process, coordinator effort

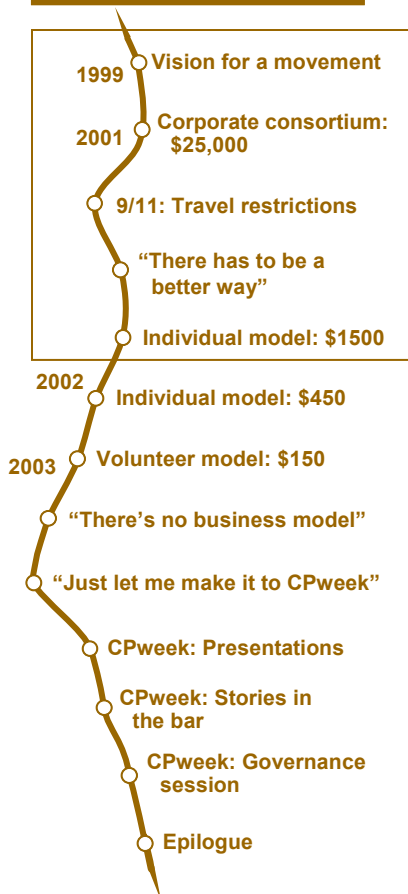
You can read through page by page, or jump to particular events on the timeline to the left. Or, you can view a summary of [Themes](#) or [Action Implications](#), learn about the [Storytelling Process](#), or see options for [Where To Go From Here](#).

John D. Smith and Elizabeth Doty (John.Smith@LearningAlliances.net / www.LearningAlliances.net and elizabeth@worklore.com / www.WorkLore.com, respectively) organized and facilitated the story-telling event reported here. They collaborated on writing and editing this document. The storytelling methods and digital story design are by WorkLore. Graphics provided by Electralux 3D. Photographs by John D. Smith.

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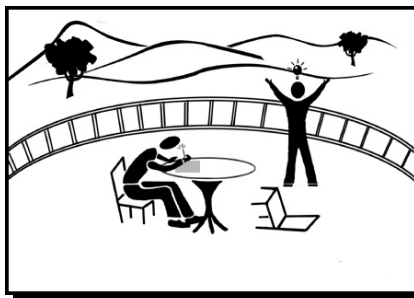
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A vision for a movement



Etienne: It was sometime in 1998 or 1999. Bill was at my house, and we were sitting on my deck overlooking California's gold country. We were thinking -- what would it look like to have an organized social movement which applied its own ideas to its creation?

Bill tore off a scrap of paper and started scribbling the beginnings

of a vision for an organized social movement to apply communities as a social change mechanism within organizations and beyond. That vision has kept me going through all these different phases, even when we started to realize there was no business model for this to work.

Corporate consortium: \$25,000

Etienne: Our first business model was to invite big corporations to participate in a consortium at \$25,000 each. We thought the money would be "peanuts" for them... although it turns out to be that getting \$25,000 for something like this is difficult.

Bill: It was seven companies, mostly Chief Learning Officers/Chief Knowledge Officers.

9/11: Travel restrictions

Etienne: The main focus of the corporate consortium phase of CPsquare was quarterly face-to-face meetings. We had our first one in May 2001. The second was to be Oct 3 in Chicago... but the entire model was disturbed by the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington.

That's when we started to work on-line and on the phone. It was interesting and we made progress, but it was not as good as our meeting in Colorado.

"There has to be a better way"

John: The consortium was a closed group, US-centric, very high level – not generative enough.

Bill: Early on, we had enough funds, but were not engaging enough people. We were not generating ideas and connections. It was too limited.

Estee: When I joined, in the post-9/11 conversations about "there must be a better way" – it was so clear that there was intention, need, and energy around CoP's, that there should be an easy way to come forward and make a going proposition.

Individual model: \$1500

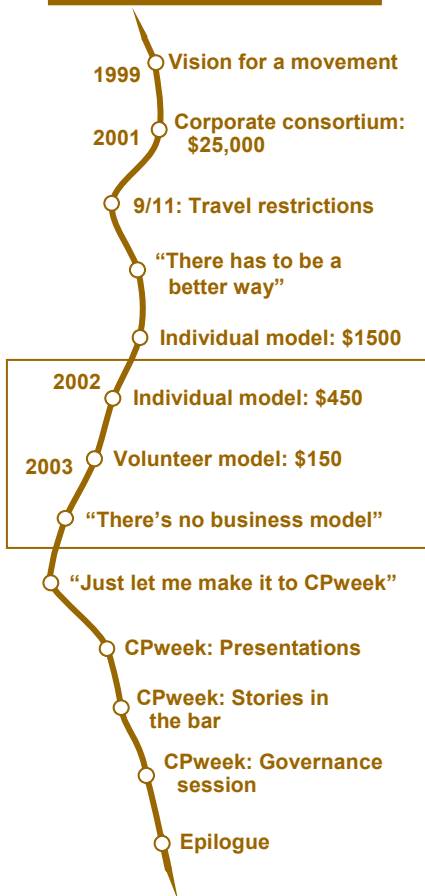
Etienne: Then we thought, "It's better to move from a corporate-oriented to an individual model." We thought: how generous it would be to offer membership at \$1500 per person. If a company wanted to send one person, they would just pay \$1500; if they wanted to send ten, they'd pay \$15,000. We lived with that for eight months.

Over that time, we talked to a lot of people. Some said, "Forget it – it's too exclusive." We found that there is only a small number of people who would pay that. Nobody beyond Europe and US and perhaps Australia.

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Individual model: \$450

Etienne: Then we had an online design conference in the fall of 2002. We realized we needed to change our model to a third iteration: \$450 annual membership fee.

We thought of it as a real discount and expected everyone would jump in. We decided to go with that model.

Volunteer model: \$150

Etienne: In the first week in January, 2003, we had lots of people sign up. But then it started to dry up.

We finally realized we were still completely overpriced, because people's companies weren't paying, it was coming out of their own pockets. What would the market bear? We went down to \$150 (\$100 non-profit/universities, \$50 students).

For us it was a whole evolution. It meant becoming a purely volunteer organization. It meant lots of surrendering along the way.

"There's no business model"



Bill: The image in my mind is at a colleague's house in San Jose. John, Estee, Etienne, Brook Manville, Paul Gustavson and I were all there. It was early in the morning, we were having breakfast... bagels, I think.

We re-opened the conversation about money. We had thought we could make a living at this – or at least some income. I was spending half time and Etienne was putting in almost full time. But at this point the possibility and feasibility of generating money for organizers was unlikely. "There is no business model", someone said.

I experienced that day as deflation. It was frustrating and difficult to come to that conclusion. And there was uncertainty and distrust regarding our commitment to take the idea forward, given the lack of a viable model. It isn't a positive recollection, but striking and memorable.

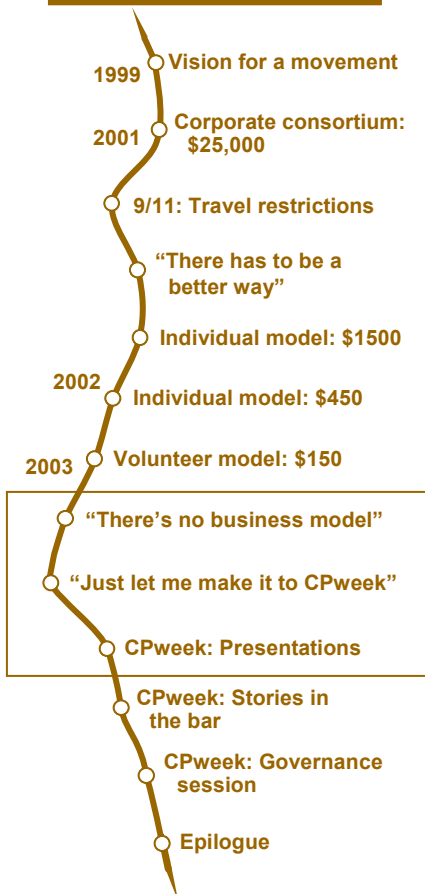
Later that day, we were talking about strategy. What is CPsquare? What kinds of people, experience or offerings would it attract? Is it a community or a set of communities? Would it be projects with funding, or not? What overhead would it take to set up accounts, website, etc? What time would it take to maintain?

Estee: How reaffirming it is to see the learning happening. It continues to create personal amazement. But how hard it has been to handle the business model question! At times, it has made me wonder if our understanding of self-organizing communities extends far enough. Am I being obtuse? I'm trying to be gentle.

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“There’s no business model” - continued

Estee: I'm going to be dramatic now: In the community of practice creating itself we haven't had a good way to explore [the business model] question. I would have liked nothing better 18 months ago than to say: "What I'm doing full time is CPsquare. It's my next professional chapter." The community needs and deserves the kind of quality output that I've learned as a community of practice person it takes dedicated resources to guarantee. We haven't made it work that way. But even making the decisions hasn't been easy.

Bill: It was difficult, knowing and wanting to help spark something, but not having a way to support ourselves. Trying to find the ways, but each one not feeling right.

“Just let me make it to CPweek”

Etienne: I realized at one point, that if I continued as I was, I was going to go bankrupt and would lose my marriage. So I told myself, just hang on until CPweek.... And then we'll see if it will work.

Brian: That **message you posted**, Etienne, switched the lights on for me. I picked up your sense of disappointment, mourning that the original dream did not work out.

Bill: How exhausted I was with all the work we'd done preparing for CPweek. Before the conference, there was so much tension and anxiety – forget about the money! I mean, would anyone show up? Would there be enough members for paying John and Amy, let alone Etienne and me? Would it WORK? Would people engage with each other or just be an “audience”?

Etienne: By the time CPweek came along, I had completely surrendered. I had no notion of what it would take. I was ready for anything.

CPweek: Presentations



Bill: When the subgroups met, people had so many creative options. Education or technology. Measuring, principles, international communities. 45 people participated: it was amazing.

Etienne: When I looked at what was being presented there, I realized we could not fail! There was so much energy in the room.

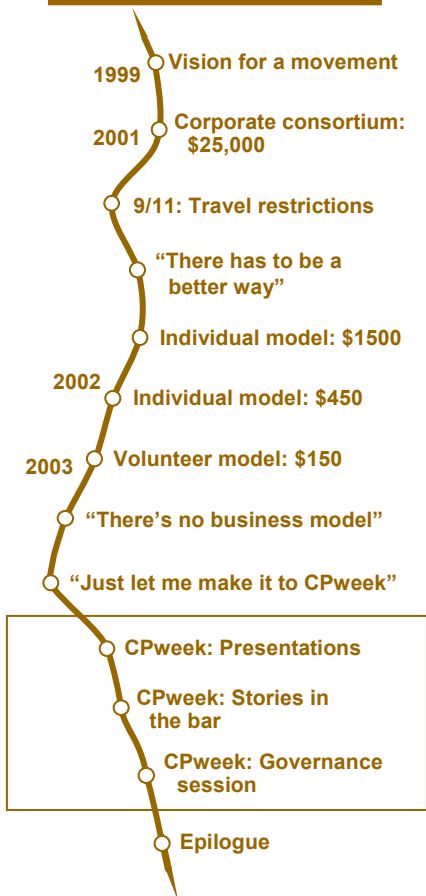
People were willing to make lemonade out of lemons. That was pretty special.

Deborah: I have never been to a meeting where I've had personal contact with such a vast network in such a short period of time as at CPweek. This is a social movement; what's happening is far broader than the corporate model. The practice areas are so broad. The network from CPweek is going to sustain CPsquare.

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CPweek: Presentations - continued

Bill: During one of the presentations, people started noticing facial expressions, talking to each other, saying "This isn't going in the direction we want." And the presenters were willing to change direction. During lunch afterwards, we laughed about it. Living through those uncomfortable moments led to more trust and openness. That could not have happened on line. And the skit night that Amy pulled together was like that, too.

Etienne: That was the highlight at CPweek: It was obvious there were lots of people who would like to see CPsquare succeed. I saw that members are not clients who pay some money to receive some community service. That was very inspiring. There's still a lot of work to create a structure in which that can happen in a more productive way. That's what a community is about: each person being more themselves because each can do what they do well.

CPweek: Stories in the bar

Bill: I'd been advocating having a "let your hair down" session at CPweek – mostly because I needed it due to the emotional overload I felt. Needing for others to take over.

Etienne: This telling of the story has made me realize that the state I was in by the time CPweek came along was just right. It was necessary to be crushed by the whole thing.

Bill: I feel I am still healing. I still have this backlog of emotional exhaustion. That's one reason I've been quiet on the site. There's something valuable in sharing this stuff, not only due to the knowledge that's embedded in emotion, but also the need to share the emotional burden.

We weren't sure but thought that the next day's energy during the governance committee discussion was motivated from having been part of the stories in the bar on Wednesday night. People said, "We do not want Etienne and Bill on the governance committee." We were curious: did that session help that? It helped us that people were assertive and clearly saying that it wasn't necessary for Etienne and I to be involved.

Deborah: I think that contributed a lot. It pushed some urgency to make sure that we got that on the agenda.

CPweek: Governance Sessions

Bill: Etienne and I were named as co-founders, and there's that concern that founders stay beyond their time. But it is very agreeable to find our own voices, and let go. For me that's working with the Practice Groups on Education, World Design, and Practice Group Leaders. That's been a gratifying transition to be more in role of participant, rather than administrator getting it going

Someone: We had great idea leaders – but the social mobilization reality was just not Etienne/Bill's interest. We need other minds for this.

Bill: We are idealists. Not interested in being practical.

Etienne: If I could be more practical, I would.

Bill: Etienne and I are still the trustees. We're holding the financial bag. Recently someone said they thought there was a business model. But I have no energy for it if it's complicated.

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CPweek: Governance Sessions - continued

Etienne: The story is not finished. We're still searching for the right model. The governance committee focus should be on the business model; we need a working committee concerned with the business model. But I think this founder needs to step back because he's too exhausted to make this transition happen.

Bill: Second that.

Epilogue

Etienne: The way I see this, Bill and my dreams were crushed into ashes, but now the community is rising like a Phoenix. It was worth everything if it blossoms – it was absolutely worth it.

Bill: I still see incredible potential. The quality of people we had at CPweek only reinforced the original vision. They were an inspiration.

Etienne: I never questioned the content -- although I questioned my ability to pull it off in a complete way, with a business model. It has made me realize my partiality and the importance of finding my own voice, and that I don't have to do it all.

John: Fast forward from the corporate consortium model to the phone calls, discussions we're having now: lots of mistakes, but there is very real learning, real inquiry going on. That leaves me feeling very, very proud. And I'm so excited about Practice Groups such as [Rural Innovation](#), [Healthcare](#), [Education](#) – look at the breadth!

Brian: The whole thing I'm experiencing as a member and that amazes me is my own obsessive interest in this thing: it's fascinating and compelling, exciting, and frustrating as it morphs into a real community. Easy to underestimate what it takes to make it work. We need a brain trust, not to lead, but to keep coherence. Making sense of what goes on. We all need to work with a single brain.

Deborah: Part of the story that I'd like to hear about is, "What has happened since CPweek with the volunteer operating committee?" I have no idea. What is needed from members to keep the community going, apart from passion and dreams?

Etienne: There will be a message going out tomorrow containing specific working groups in a governing structure, and inviting people to join.

Someone: This conversation was very useful. This was real community work.

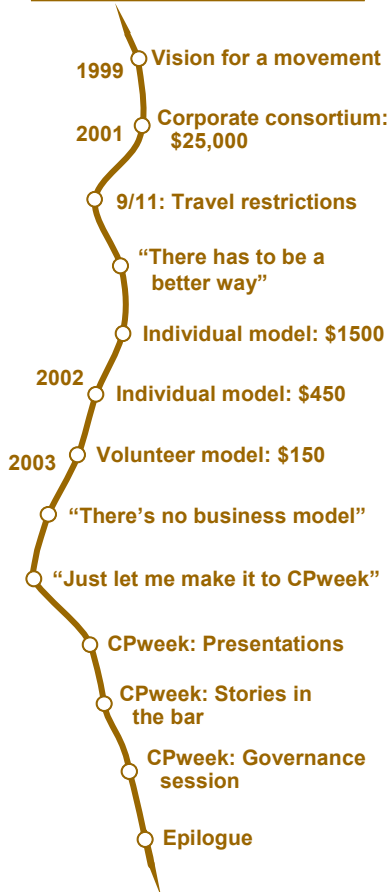
Themes

This section summarizes themes that came out of the storytelling, the check-in, and the closing dialogue.

NOTE: Quotes from the story are repeated here as relevant.

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Business Models

Estee: ...It was so clear that there was intention, need, and energy around CoP's, that there should be an easy way to come forward and make a going proposition.

Bill: It was difficult, knowing and wanting to help spark something, but not having a way to support ourselves.....Early on, we had enough funds, but were not engaging enough people. We were not generating ideas and connections. It was too limited.

John: Starting with the consortium meetings, we've been searching until we find a model that works. The consortium was a closed group, US-centric, very high level – not generative enough. Then fast-forward to the phone calls, discussions we're having now: lots of mistakes, but there is very real learning, real inquiry going on. That leaves me feeling very, very proud.

Etienne: The story is not finished. We're still searching for the right model. The governance committee focus should be on the business model; we need a working committee concerned with the business model.

Convergence & Decision-Making

Brian: We need a brain trust, not to lead, but to keep coherence. Making sense of what goes on. We all need to work with a single brain.

One thought: how we can organize periodic whole community meetings. For a community to work we need times to diverge and converge. We haven't figured out how to converge.

Estee: The conversation about converging and decision-making exactly reflects my concerns along the lines of business model. Navigating and decision-making. Nice to feel all this coming together.

Someone: We should recognize that there will be people who resist organizing... but I envision something permeable.

Other Similar Communities

John: The EU Knowledge Board would be an interesting source for a parallel story. They had a big fat grant, were well supported, and had people on staff. Now that their grant is ending and they are heading into a transition, perhaps we could reflect together.... What is different about our growth and theirs? I have to admit I thought ours would be hardy, close to the bone, because we are constantly held to standards of relevance and utility, being member-based. What we are is a manifestation of our practice, which can inform and extend our ideas. But is this so? What would we learn by talking to others?

Jim: As we build our own story, it would be interesting to echo our stories against others. Young organizations like Plexus, which are only a couple years older than us, with similar growing pains.

John. Or the Chaordic Alliance, which Jeff De Cagna has been talking about recently.

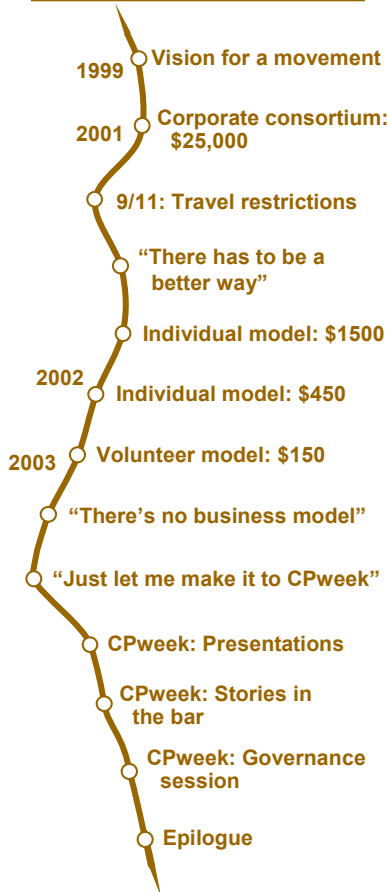
Corporate Sponsorship

Bill: The original idea was a social movement, going corporate was a sidetrack, it sucked us in. It was a common model, IKM was using it.

Etienne: Also, there was the belief that the corporate world was a laboratory and a funding source and leadership, for something that could be applied more broadly. So we brought the companies together because we were feeling those companies were laboratories.

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Coordinator Effort

John: My 'aha!' is the work involved in keeping a community afloat.

Bill: I've been noticing the importance of coordinating, keeping momentum. Often no one is ready to take that time. What kind of support do they need?

How exhausted I was with all the work we'd done preparing for CPweek. Before the conference, there was so much tension and anxiety – forget about the money. I mean, would anyone show up? Would there be enough members for paying John and Amy, let alone Etienne and me? Would it WORK? Would people engage with each other or just be an "audience"?

Working With Emotional Information

Bill: There's something valuable in sharing this stuff, not only due to the knowledge that's embedded in emotion, but also the need to share the emotional burden.

Etienne: This telling of the story has made me realize that the state I was in by the time CPweek came along was just right. I had completely surrendered. I had no notion of what it would take. I was ready for anything. There was some openness. That crash was necessary.

Someone: Maybe there's a logic to this.

Other: But you can't see it in the middle.

John: Maybe this is another area of expertise/development. We need to know what works for others to pursue communities, but we also need knowledge of ourselves and a process for working through these feelings.

Ross Wirth: Not all communities will survive. It is hard to release, let them die.

Partiality & Complementarity

Etienne: My deepest learning has been how important it is to find your own voice. How good it is to have a community: you can be yourself, and don't need to do everything. I knew that theoretically before, but much more practically in the context of CPsquare.

I never questioned the content -- although I questioned my ability to pull it off in a complete way, with a business model. It has made me realize my partiality and the importance of finding my own voice, and that I don't have to do it all.

F2F/On-line

Etienne: I had always resisted the idea of CPsquare being an online community. It had started very much as a f2f group. In 2nd phase, I was hoping it would be more phone-based with some f2f dialog and annual conference.

It turns out there's much more emphasis on online conversation than I had anticipated. That explains a bit why we initially chose a platform that was not so conversation oriented. Now we're moving to more conversation oriented (i.e., from Simplify to Web Crossing). What can happen online, I don't know. I think it was important to be in Santa Cruz for CPweek. Not just that we were f2f and the feeling was palpable but that it was designated time, made time to be that experience.

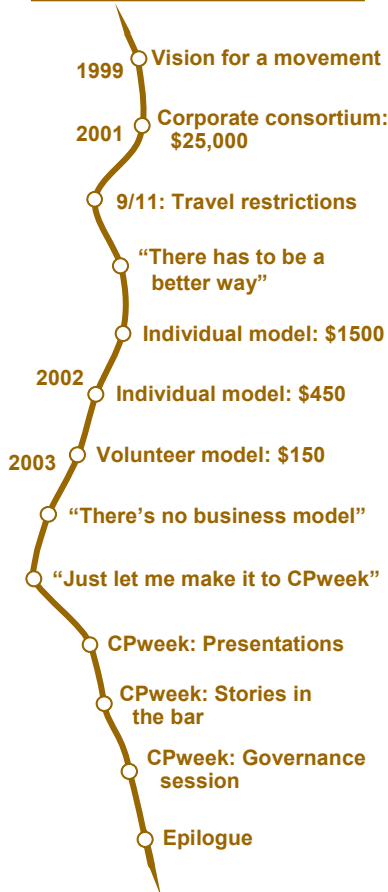
John: The Setubal story is part of internationalizing CPsquare. Ueli, Nancy, and Bev are now jointly producing a piece on internationalizing the community. They are doing lots of work online, but the basis of their commitment was that F2F meeting in Portugal.

Action Implications

This section lists the suggestions and action ideas that came out of the storytelling and closing dialogue. We've "spiced things up" a little by adding photos from CPweek.

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Business Model Committee

- The **governance committee** focus should be on the business model; we need a working committee concerned with the business model.
- Consider offering saleable products

Support Convergence

- Create mechanisms to enable convergence, such as periodic whole community meetings, all-community listserv



"History Wall" at CPweek

Encourage Local Activity

- Encourage local hubs to form
- Announce related events such as **Nachotta**, which are on the boundary of CPsquare



SABA presentation at CPweek

Invite Other Stories

- Invite EU Knowledge Board, Plexus, Chaordic Commons to 4-way story event to learn from parallel experiences
- Invite other CPsquare members to add to the story, especially Amy Keill



"Skit night" at CPweek

Storytelling Process

This is a brief overview of the storytelling process we used to surface this story.

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Why tell the story?

Taking time to tell the community's stories reinforces the key drivers of community – deepening the engagement of existing members, and initiating new members – while allowing us to share knowledge and gain perspective on our own experience.

Have to be aware that any story we ask for is partial, and know that there are other stories from other perspectives.

The method we used

Intent: Focus on Bill's and Etienne's stories as a starting point for the CPsquare story

Check-in: Name, organization, and one sentence re: how connected with Bill/Etienne's work OR got "aha!" re: learning/community.

Warm-up: Bill/Etienne – think of 3 people who surprised, amazed or challenged you in your work with CPsquare. Others – think of what surprised, amazed, challenged you when connected with Bill/Etienne's work or CoP's as an idea. Jot down notes to use as questions later.

Remembering: Bill/Etienne return to list of 3 people, see what comes to mind as you think about them. Pick one image and go back there in your mind – see if you can relive it with all 5 senses. How did it feel? Take a moment to notice what you remember. Then, let that scene serve as a starting point for your story, and take us along wherever it goes from there. Each one start, then interweave as feels right --- others chime in with questions or additions.

Telling: Tell as though never told before; listen as if never told. Focus on what happened, more than intellectual concepts.

Dialogue: Explore themes or ideas.

Closing: Any closing thoughts, 'aha!'s from today's call.

Observations about the process

Bill: It sounds like story-telling has led to practical suggestions. Seems like such urgency to deal with practical things. Was that the expectation? Are we converging too much?

Elizabeth: I think it was a success that this led to practical suggestions, because the telling caused us to "loop further out" to inform those suggestions with more context and reflection than we normally might.

Was this useful to you, Deborah, to hear the stories again, since you were also at the bar?

Deborah: I'm hearing different things today. A curious emphasis on the business model. When stories are retold, it seems like they're retold based on what's important or urgent at that moment.

Elizabeth: Yes – people almost can't tell a story without a reason – so whatever's urgent must affect that.

Who else's story do we need to hear?

Knowing that this is only a part of the story, we recognized the need for others' perspectives to fill it out and inform it, especially:

Amy Keill, other CPsquare members, and other young organizations, such as EU Knowledge Board, Plexus, and Chaordic Commons.

Where To Go From Here

Here are some ideas for where you can go from here if this story sparked your interest.

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Comment / Add To This Story

Join the [on-line discussion](#) about this story – to add comments or contribute your piece of the story. Photos and other artifacts are welcome! Share your thoughts about the uses of storytelling for knowledge discovery and community building in the [Social Process Practice Group](#).

Help the Governance Transition

Join the on-line discussion about [CPsquare's governance](#) and future business model. Help move the idea forward for a business model committee. Look for and offer ways to improve decision-making and convergence. Follow the latest CPsquare news.

Join a working group: [Practice Group Leadership](#), [Membership](#), [Events](#), [Technology Platforms](#), [Knowledge Base](#), [CPsquare Charter](#).

Participate more actively in the [Practice Group\(s\)](#) that interest you. Start a local group or show up for one near you.

Invite Others' Stories

Lead the [Event working group](#) in creating a 4-way story event to learn from parallel experiences of other young organizations, such as the EU Knowledge Board, Plexus, Chaordic Commons.

Invite others at CPsquare to comment on and add to this story.