TALKING "HACKATHON"

Communication at the Rural Development Marathon

... for those sensitive to word repetition, the forthcoming pages will be shocking: the word 'communication' occurs thirty-seven times in this case study...

"Hearing the word HACKATHON, the first things that come to my mind are DECATHLON or EXATLON", I said six months ago, when I had no idea what a rural development marathon or a social hackathon was. Whether a hackathon has the potential to develop into a popular brand that is indispensable for the community – it remains to be seen. We keep our fingers crossed for this, as the steps so far are encouraging. In what follows, I will present and analyse a project which was successful both in communication/brand building and organisational respects as well.

Internal communication

Communication between organisers, project leaders and mentors

As a mentor, I had the opportunity to observe and practice face-to-face communication among colleagues and organisers. From the moment I first heard about the Rural Development Marathon from the main organisers on my own radio programme, to the moment they contacted me as a potential participant, and spoke to me in detail about it, all the way to observing how communication took place at the events – everything was easy to discern and experience, including communication, speech, verbal and non-verbal interaction between people. It was fascinating to see how, in some situations, communication helped to "move things along", facilitated thinking and working together, or, in other cases, how it hindered or impeded the process.

The way in which the organiser of the rural development marathon tried to get my attention and "initiate me" into this kind of project was perfect. His presentation, rhetorical and reporting skills were excellent, just like his ability to persuade me to decide that I was interested in this subject, in the event and everything connected to it. Although it was difficult to imagine what would come out of it, I was curious about this project, how it was planned and thought out, and my curiosity was so strong that I wanted to be part of it, even without knowing what it implied. I am convinced that the other mentor candidates experienced this invitation in a similar way, and were courageous, interested and optimistic when they agreed to take part.

In an attempt to arouse curiosity and encourage participation, László Lázár used a series of expressions that made me not want to miss out on the "party"; at the same time, however, I was able to apply these and similar expressions myself, when trying to involve new mentor candidates: "we need to mobilize rural actors ", "we need to get them to think together", "we

need to support grassroots initiatives", "we need to encourage the population to work for the community".

On top of the right terminology and the preceding promotion activities, a cheerful spirit and a good sense of humour also contributed greatly to the fact that mentors and project promoters were happy and excited to participate in such a serious project. It is a fun project that deals with serious issues, but it can also be a very rewarding competition. Of course, the use of prizes as motivation and communication about them also play a major role in the success of the event and in attracting the right number of participants.

The first event of the project raised the most doubts, but only at the very beginning, about who would be able to assert themselves, who would make the presentation, who would dare to show themselves, communicate and collaborate. After all, we were mostly strangers at the very first meeting. The ice-breaking games and the introductory rounds were effective, but I believe that their effectiveness depended on the spontaneity and casual manner of the organisers and project leaders, as well as on their non-verbal signals of openness. Within a short time, about 1-2 hours into the event, it felt as if people had known each other for a long time, therefore collaboration was smooth during the training and the coaching process.

There were some tasks that, in my opinion, were not presented and explained properly, which resulted in minor disagreements, lots of back and forth, as well as blockages in the interpretation. In hindsight, I had the feeling that the organisers deliberately left certain items and tasks open, to facilitate a kind of brainstorming, so that we, as mentor candidates, have the chance to express our opinions, put forward our ideas, contribute effectively, and become owners of the process, like an intellectual property.

During the mentor training, there was excellent communication between the participants, we quickly opened up to each other and everyone was quick to share their opinions while working in teams. In all the impromptu teams that came together for one task, team members were quick to decided who would present the topic and solutions to the others, which was a simulation of the real, big marathon. Obviously, the people who took on this task were those who are more comfortable in public speaking and have experience in it, and therefore have the communication and presentation skills to easily convey, explain and interpret what the team had thought up and formulated. I don't think that all mentors should necessarily have giving presentations and public speaking as their strengths; in our case, we had just the right number of people for this; furthermore, all mentors had the necessary communication skills to mentor a competing team. If there had been more inhibited, more reserved, "quieter" organisers/mentors, I would have suggested to include a 1–2-hour communication workshop during the training. This was not necessary. For the competing teams, on the other hand, assistance in this direction had already been on its way, but more on that a little later...

Communication between the organisers and the mentors was good and efficient in most cases during the mentor training and the rural development marathon. There were, however,

situations where information was lost or not properly emphasized. I am thinking here of the importance of using the mentor room during the marathon. The organisers did not express strongly enough their preference and need to use the mentor room for consultation and discussion.

The mentors did not report on the processes of the teamwork, the obstacles and difficulties, and they failed to ask for help from the leaders in unclear areas. Thus, the organisers and project leaders were not always aware of what was going on within the teams, what the difficulties were, or where they might have needed to intervene. What was not always clear was how many minutes the final presentation of the teams should take. Even though there was a dilemma about it, only one mentor (me) asked for clarification from the project leader. At this point, it would have been advisable to ask for answers and clarifications for the parts in question. In other words, communication seemed to break down here, but eventually it did not, as it did not cause any major problem. As it turned out, some of the organisers also felt at times that they had not received a clear explanation about the allocation of tasks from the project leader, and they felt left out. I would like to point out here that, if someone feels or notices information hiatus, the best thing to do is not to wait for it to fall from the sky, but to communicate what the problem or request is. "Even the mother cannot understand the words of a dumb child", as the Hungarian proverb goes. So, the communication process must be two-way, if there is a blockage somewhere, one of the parties must indicate or initiate the communication.

The communication of the "team" was greatly facilitated by a private Facebook group set up during the project, where members could quickly ask questions, share content, documents and useful information. This communication channel and platform is an important basic tool for organisational tasks, logistics and implementation, for deepening and making relationships informal, as well as for further cooperation.

The conditions of communication in the offline space were satisfactory, there was hardly any distracting factor such as noise or other interruptions, like the coming and going of participants (once or twice there was perhaps a small distraction when the staff of the mentor training venue, the guesthouse, started arranging and setting the tables. This, being in the same room as the workshops, was sometimes a little distracting, but the project leader's presentation was so exciting that the attention was steered back in the right direction).

As for non-verbal communication, we could see that initially the participants and mentors sat with their legs and knees tightly together or crossed, mostly with their arms folded, indicating defensiveness, reticence, and slight initial tension. Then, during the individual exercises, everyone began to open up, they shook hands and had some kind of physical contact, and eventually they were sitting in more comfortable and relaxed positions in their seats. During the relaxing evening programmes participants became quite comfortable, curling up on chairs, hugging each other, leaning close to each other. The main organiser's friendly and casual manner throughout the whole project was very relaxing, a sincere, warm embrace was always at hand, whether it was a moment of arrival, farewell, departure, or joy.

The "lubricants" of communication between mentors and organisers, aka the efficiency factors: making spice salt, singing together, drinking wine together, watching a film, drinking tea, morning gymnastics, night "walks", "bookmaking".

Communication between mentors, organisers and participants

I found that communication between the organisers, mentors and the participants was smooth and good. Participants received information about each point and task in the programme, while organisers and mentors tried to establish casual communication and relationship so that the participants could feel comfortable to ask questions and raise any doubts they had. It was a good idea to have two mentors per team, thus if one mentor got stuck with the communication or the facilitation, the other one could help out and round things up. The pairing of mentors was cleverly done, they complemented each other well. In some cases, a forceful and firm communication style was needed on the part of mentors, sometimes they had to intervene in certain ideas, to steer the work in a new direction, to stop the process briefly and suggest one solution or another. Soft "communication" would not have been able to do that.

Work within the teams also started with an ice-breaker game and with introductions so that communication can be as smooth and easy as possible for the two days and to ensure that no one feels stressed. The mentors were responsible for creating a casual atmosphere, and they said that more icebreaker and team-building games were needed to create real team cohesion. It all turned out well, the chemistry of communication worked, to such an extent that some people are still in touch after the marathon, continuing to think about the project ideas developed during the event, planning together; messenger groups were set up, meetings took place offline, both between team members and with mentors.

Communication between organisers, project leaders and the jury

This section is a small part of the whole story, but I think it is very important how we communicate the project to the jury, how they understand it or agree on what and along what criteria it should be evaluated. It is clear that the jury evaluates the proposed projects and asks questions about them according to its members' professional backgrounds and interests, but these aspects must be known to the project promoters and, above all, to the mentors and organisers, to avoid situations where a team thinks that they have to talk about cabbage and the jury asks them about tomatoes. Here, the project leader is responsible for communication and for ensuring that the communicator and the listener, the project promoter and the jury are on the same wavelength and no misunderstanding happens. This part did not go so seamlessly in our rural development marathon, but fortunately the project promoters were so prepared and resourceful that they stood up to the many questions they received about their ideas. It is possible though that some did not experience it so positively that they were not asked about the very subjects that they had

worked on and thought through the most. Although competition is competition...you must stand your ground!

Presentation style of competing teams

The teams were made up of very diverse members from different walks of life, with different qualifications and competences. So, evidently, not everyone had the same level of communication and rhetorical skills. The workshops were designed to allow everyone to choose the most appropriate task. Almost every team could easily find one or two candidates to do the final presentation. However, there were one or two teams that had serious problems in selecting and deciding who would take the stage to present the topic they had developed. As a communications professional, I was happy to be at their service in these cases. In preparing for the final presentations, almost all the teams needed my help, advice and ideas. I gave them suggestions and tactical advice on how to start the presentation, how to present their topic in a way that would make it more exciting and attention-grabbing. I gave a crash course in public speaking and overcoming stage fright, which I think they found useful.

It is not easy to present a serious and worthwhile topic that is of great importance to the community in three minutes and include all the crucial information and to do so in a way that is interesting and convincing. It is true that knowledge of the subject, professionalism and substance are the most important, but the short time available to the project promoters meant that it was crucial to find a way to present all the smart content. Like it or not, packaging is very important. It was a pleasure to see that the presenters were able to polish their speaking style and express themselves clearly, loudly and confidently enough, avoiding unnecessary annoying gesticulations, and in most cases playing with the tone of voice and pauses. Playfulness was present in the form of a variety of funny, refreshing, creative ideas and props... adding colour and excitement to the event and to the presentations. The dramaturgical sketches and ways of expression were also very effective. For example, one team illustrated the problem of cycle paths and trails, endangered by the presence of bears, with a large teddy bear rolling on stage. I am convinced that this amusing and imaginative scene did not detract from the seriousness of the subject and the professionalism of the presentation.

External communication

Communication in the process of recruiting participants

Although the local mayors had the largest role in recruiting participants, I think it would have been better for the organisers to reach out to potential participants in different ways. This is not to say that they should have bypassed the mayors and invited people without them, but simply that we could have reinforced the process, especially where the mayor eventually did not

manage to recruit any participant. I would have used a short radio jingle and Facebook call to spread the word and ensure that the largest number of potential community "mobilisers" who want to do something and think have the chance to do so. I think this way more people could have been reached and they could have used the marathon experience in their own community.

The project's branding

All the branding elements and tools that we attribute to a multi-phase, multi-event project were by and large used. The project's visual communication was characterised by a coherent and simple set of elements that were noticeable, easy to remember, and easy to identify. The colour scheme of the visual elements was clear, fitting and expressive, and both the logo and the various visuals used modern graphic elements. The logo used a combination of green and black, highlighting the project name, and the designer of the logo was also very creative in incorporating the initials of the project, V and M (from the Hungarian title 'Vidékfejlesztési Maraton', i.e. Rural Development Marathon) into the graphic elements depicting a mountain and a valley. Both the project logo and the coordinating organisation's logo are smartly displayed on all the elements of the branding: badge, notebook, banner, attendance sheet, roll up, exercise sheets, projector/presentations, prize board, gift bags, t-shirt.

What I particularly liked was the meticulousness and attention to detail, as well as the professionalism that characterised the way certain elements were treated, i.e. the careful use of the carriers of image elements (even if it was not all conscious on the part of the organisers, I had the impression that that the image was also designed and realised with a very high level of professionalism) ... e.g. the ribbons of the organisers' and competitors' badges were different in colour. The logos of partners and sponsors also appeared where they were supposed to appear, of course.

I would suggest in the near future for similar events to distribute good old and proven tools such as personalized folders, stationery, serving refreshments during the breaks from the event's own mug, and instead of the boring black folder in the hands of the presenters, use cool and stylish announcer's cards with the event's big logo on the back. At the same time, it would be nice and professional if the project could developed an entire identity manual ("mapa de identitate vizuala"/"visual identity map").

The project in the media
The media was used to the maximum during the Rural Development Marathon. Perhaps more emphasis could have been put on promotion, but there were one or two relevant appearances, e.g. on the regional programmes of the Székelykeresztúr radio VoxFm. The events and the coverage of the whole project were publicised on social media (Facebook), TV, radio and news portals: Sóvidék Televízió, Príma Rádió, VoxFm Rádió, www.szekelyhon.ro, Marosvásárhelyi

Rádió, https://www.facebook.com/ szekelykereszturi.kisterseg, www.facebook.com/Homoród-Küküllő-Leader-Egyesület, soundcloud.com, www.hkleader.ro.

No matter which media coverage we take, or which participant we talk to, we have the impression that the press, project promoters, organisers, partners and lay outsiders alike have all come to the same conclusion and have a similar image of this project, which appeared like an alien to everyone some six months ago, and now think that the Rural Development Marathon was useful, that it should be continued, that it has pressed people and municipalities do something innovative and exciting together, for the community.

Conclusion:
We found out that we speak the smae language. We shape communities and

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