

WeGetletters

by Michael W Lucas



Dear We Get Letters,

Why do all these open-source projects have foundations anyway? Aren't we just contributing code to the world? Why bother with these silly legalities?

—Just Hack The Code

JHTC,

The simplest way to understand open-source foundations is to start a really tiny open-source project, preferably as a hobby. Nurture that project until it becomes key infrastructure for a considerable portion of the world's technology stack. You will discover that all your time, energy, health, relationships, and hope have been exchanged for technological success and an impressive colony of keratinophilic onychomycosis. Going barefoot in the sunlight would help the latter, if your homeland experiences occasionally thaws, which mine does not. You can exchange technological success for precious Social Media Clout, a virtual currency accepted precisely nowhere. Still, my efforts to breed new varieties of *Trichophyton rubrum* proceed nicely.

As usual, the problem is people.

You write a bit of code to solve a problem. That's fine. That's what people in our business do. The problem starts when you invitingly share that code. Yes, I occasionally include my code in books, but only in the most hostile manner possible. You won't find my code on GitHub or ForgedSource or any of those dubious repositories of unhealthy knowledge. If you want my code, you must retype it from the print book. The act of passing it through your eyes into your brain and down into your fingertips gives your nervous system ample opportunity to recoil in revulsion and fling the tome into the nearest incinerator. If you snag my code from an ebook, you'll discover that an electronic document can contain characters that are invisible in place, but when copied and pasted become obvious. Code in my ebooks all include the black sigil *Odegra*, which translates to "Hail the Great Beast, Devourer of Worlds," so copying is self-correcting or at least self-immolating. Being the world's foremost proponent of fault-oblivious computing imposes heavy responsibilities, but I fulfill them as completely as my microplastics-infested meatsuit permits.

But you? You share your code and invite others to use it. To evaluate it. To send bug reports. To *deploy it in production*. Some other person finds your code and it doesn't quite meet her needs, so she sends a patch to add a feature, which makes the code more inviting so other people adopt it, and pretty soon you have dozens of users. Hundreds. Thousands. Perhaps hundreds of millions, and you're hunched over a keyboard evaluating patches and settling disagreements 25 by 8 by 366, living your worst life and wishing you had time to scratch your feet.

Every one of those users and contributors has a different idea of what your software should be. You've foolishly retained a sense of community so you feel obliged to tell them all the exact nature of their errors, but writing lengthy emails would crank your days up to thirty hours and at this point you're incapable of recording coherent videos. It would be so much easier if you could berate them into submission face-to-face.

Again, the problem is people.

You can't stick a meatsuit in a cardboard box and ship it by sea mail. They are heavy and need air and feeding and watering and the occasional bout of vice. They need tickets for trains or planes or dolphins or however they get from their current spot to the meeting. And you need a spot for a meeting. You could invite everyone to your hovel, but you're better off remaining ignorant of exactly which of your contributors are indifferent or full-on hostile to personal hygiene. This means purchasing, conquering, or renting a meeting space.

If your software is widely used and you have collected enough Social Media Clout, you can probably interest big companies in giving your project money. Monopolists believe that donations to the little folk absolve them of guilt. Your problem is, they don't want to give you the money. They want to give your project the money. Does your project have a bank account? No, because you need identification to get a bank account and you didn't even think to get it a legal birth certificate before your first public posting, you selfish short-sighted doofus. Let alone a motor vehicle operator's license. If you want outsiders to give you—uh, your project, your *project*—money, it needs a legal entity.

You could start a company, but then outsiders would expect you to provide a service or product in exchange for their cash. Not only is that work you don't have time for, the aforementioned outsiders would care what that service or product is and how reasonable the price looks. But a foundation? A foundation is charity. People give money to charities to do their charity thing and don't care if it's reasonable or not. If the Internet depends on your software, that's a legit charity. Plus, charities can employ people. You could collect donations, pay yourself a salary, ditch the day job, and fall back to working on your project a paltry twelve hours a day!

It's not that easy, because—again—people. Every country has voluminous rules on who can form foundations and how they must be licensed and which reports must be filed with which agencies. If your foundation collects enough funds, it will need to hire a person who knows what they're doing, creating another set of headaches, except you're outsourcing them to the person you hire so that's okay.

A well-run foundation supports its project. By "support," I mean it can buy tickets and meals and meeting spaces and even pay people to write particularly vexing code or to sojourn to distant lands and slap particularly obnoxious would-be contributors with a white glove and challenge them to pistols at dawn. A particularly intransigent foundation can even hire *lawyers*, or at least keep them on retainer. Most of the funding comes from big companies who know perfectly well how you're spending the money but get tax benefits so they don't care. Foundations also need a large number of small contributors, to show the tax

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authorities that individuals care about the charity and that the foundation is not about tax evasion, or at least not *only*. Your five dollars is not about the five dollars: it's about adding a name to the list of people who care.

So, if a foundation does all this, why don't more projects have one?

The exact same problem: people.

The FreeBSD Foundation that suckered me into answering your insipid^Wirritating^Winevitable letters (while still not delivering on the gelato I was promised thirty columns ago) relies on community to do the work. Someone has to figure out what meetings need to happen and which tickets need purchasing and who merits administration of a white glove across the cheekbone at high velocity. So long as the foundation remains involved in the community, and the community with the foundation, all is well. The people are the foundation.

And by "people," by the way, I mean you. The person reading this column.

So, there you have it. A foundation is a method of converting big company money into junkets, meals, and gelato. Except there's no gelato.

Now pardon me while I do something about my feet and contemplate solving once and for all the actual root cause of everything.

Have a question for Michael?
Send it to letters@freebsdjournal.org



MICHAEL W LUCAS has written more than fifty books, including *Absolute FreeBSD*, *\$ git commit murder*, and *Networking for System Administrators*. He seriously expected this Journal to give him the boot years ago and intends to incrementally increase the vitriol of his column until they do so. Learn more at <https://mwl.io>.

Books that will help you. Or not.

“While we appreciate Mr Lucas’ unique contributions to the Journal, we do feel his specific talents are not being fully utilized. Please buy his books, his hours, autographed photos, whatever, so that he is otherwise engaged.”

— John Baldwin
FreeBSD Journal Editorial Board Chair

<https://mwl.io>

