Asynchronous Decision Making – why and how?

Bertrand Delacretaz - Principal Scientist, Adobe - Board Member, Apache Software Foundation

FOSS Backstage Micro-Summit, Berlin, November 2017 - @bdelacretaz, grep.codeconsult.ch

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Be Klebebande

I will NOT attend your meeting

I'm an Open Source person!

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Apache Software Foundation Member and Director

ApacheCon Séville, November 2016
slides revision 2016-11-14

APACHECON Europe

https://s.apache.org/PMvk
on blogs.apache.org/foundation

The Apache Software Foundation Blog

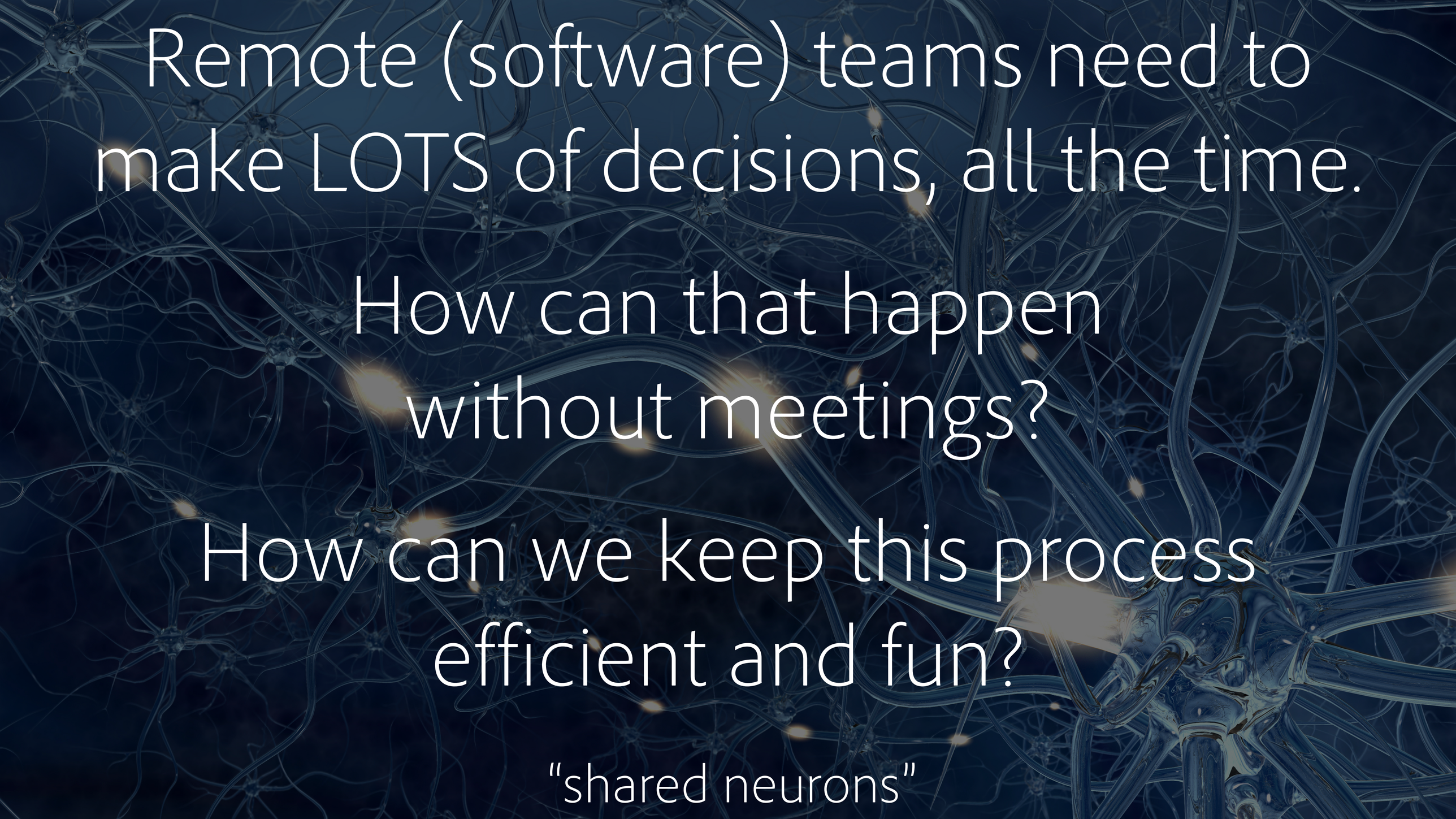
MONDAY FEBRUARY 06, 2017

Success at Apache: Asynchronous Decision Making

by Bertrand Delacretaz

Asynchronous decision making is a key enabler of our geographically and culturally distributed Open source teams. In this post I'll explain the ingredients that make it work at the ASF.

I became active in the ASF in 2001 via Gianugo Rabellino - he was the one who started the discussions with Apache Fop about me donating the jfor XLS-FO to RTF converter that had developed earlier. It was already too late to uninvent RTF which is a terrible I digress. I am currently a member of the Board of Directors of the ASF doing a lot of thinking (and presentations) about what makes the collaboration and Shared Neurons.


Remote (software) teams need to make LOTS of decisions, all the time.
How can that happen without meetings?
How can we keep this process efficient and fun?
“shared neurons”

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WHAT
is Asynchronous Decision Making ?
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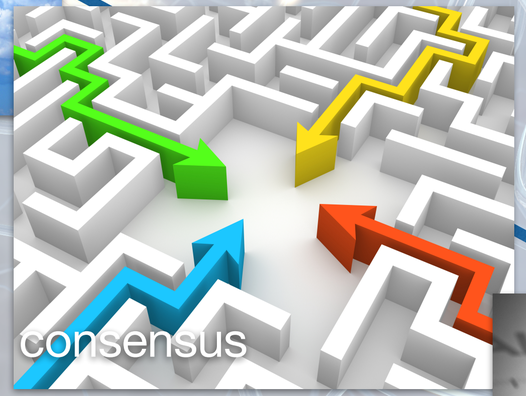
Four steps to a decision



Unless formally required by your organization, none of these require people to be in the same “place” at the same time: *everything can happen asynchronously*.

Tools for asynchronous decisions

shared async comms channel

free-form, chatty

shared case management tool

structured, chronology

No meetings required
More time to think
More precise in a foreign language or if you're shy

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WHY
do we need Asynchronous Decision Making ?
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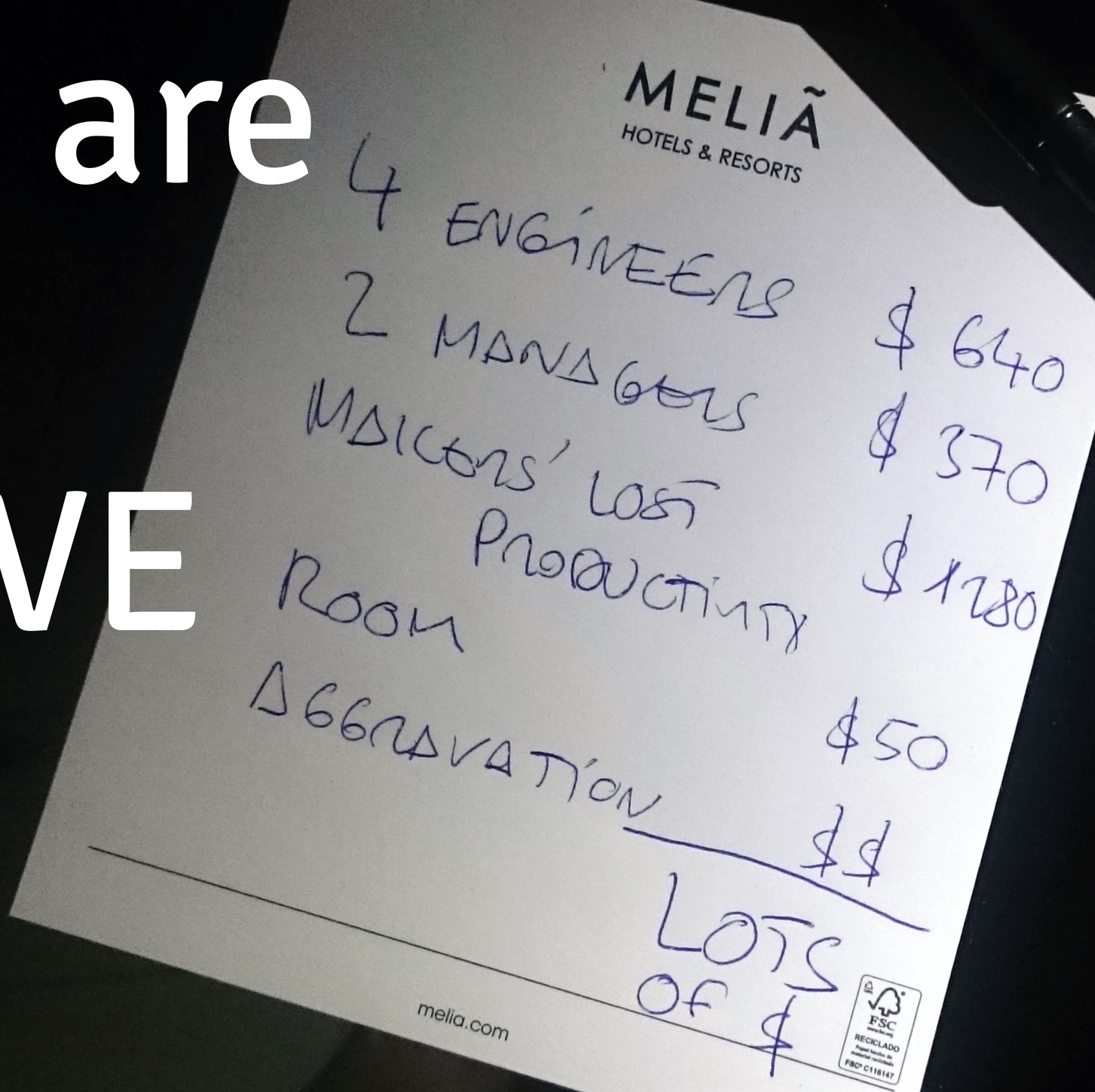
On a Maker’s Schedule,
a one-hour meeting
might waste half a day
On a Manager’s Schedule
it’s just another one-hour slot.
Credit to Paul Graham, blog post: https://s.apache.org/ms

Meetings are (crazily) EXPENSIVE



are you on mute?
what's the goal?
Bob forgot
forgot Bob!
wrong topic
failed meetings?
say again?
who's in charge?
unprepared
we'll decide next week…

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HOW
does Asynchronous Decision Making work?
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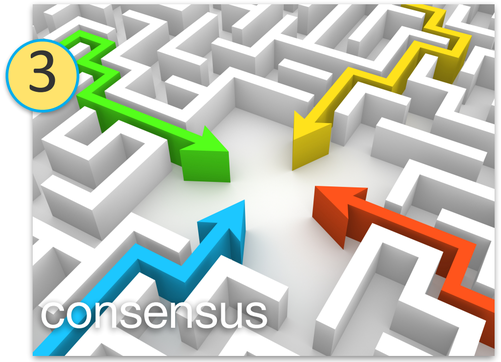
Tools for asynchronous decisions

shared async
comms channel



shared case
management tool

Apache projects (where I come from) use their **dev mailing lists** as a shared asynchronous communications channel and **issue trackers** for case management.
Your mileage may vary - but the principles are not limited to software development.

Building consensus

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Quorum

The Federal Council constitutes a quorum when at least four members are present. It decides by consensus whenever possible, and sometimes also holds a vote. In the event of a tied vote, the president's vote counts twice.

Consensus: *widespread agreement among people who have decision power.*

Natural consensus is best. When that doesn't emerge, clear voting rules can help!

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Because one of the fundamental aspects of accomplishing things within the Apache framework is doing so by consensus, there obviously needs to be a way to tell whether it has been reached. This is done by voting.

There are essentially three types of vote:

1. Code modifications,
2. Package releases
3. Procedural

Votes on procedural issues follow the common format of majority rule unless otherwise stated. That is, if there are more favourable votes than unfavourable ones, the issue is considered to have passed -- regardless of the number of votes in each category. (If the number of votes seems too small to be representative of a community consensus, the issue is typically not pursued. However, see the description of lazy consensus for a modifying factor.)

Votes on code modifications follow a different model. In this scenario, a negative vote constitutes a veto , which cannot be overridden. Again, this model may be modified by a lazy consensus declaration when the request for a vote is raised, but the full-stop nature of a negative vote is unchanged. Under normal (non-lazy consensus) conditions, the proposal requires three positive votes and no negative ones in order to pass; if it fails to garner the requisite amount of support, it doesn't -- and typically is either withdrawn, modified, or simply allowed to languish as an open issue until someone gets around to removing it.

Votes on whether a package is ready to be released or not use yet a different mechanism: are there are least three binding votes in favour of the release? See more about this below.

BINDING VOTES

Who is permitted to vote is, to some extent, a community-specific thing.

PMC members have formally binding votes, but in general community members are encouraged to vote, even if their votes are only advisory.

IMPLICATIONS OF VOTING

In some cases and communities, the exercise of a vote carries some responsibilities that may not be immediately obvious. For example, in some cases a favourable vote carries the implied message 'I approve **and** I'm willing to help.' Also, an unfavourable vote may imply that 'I disapprove, but I have an alternative and will help with that alternative.'

The tacit implications of voting should be spelt out in the community's guidelines. However, **in no case** may someone's vote be considered invalid if the implied commitment doesn't appear to be met; a vote is a formal expression of opinion, *not* of commitment.

If the R-T-C policy is in effect, a positive vote carries the very strong implied message, 'I have tested this patch myself, and found it good.' Similarly, a negative vote usually means that the patch was tested and found to be *not* -good, although the veto (for such it is in this case) may be based on other technical grounds.

EXPRESSING VOTES: +1, 0, -1, AND FRACTIONS¶

The voting process in Apache may seem more than a little weird if you've never encountered it before. Votes are represented as numbers between -1 and +1, with '-1' meaning 'no' and '+1' meaning 'yes.'

The in-between values are indicative of how strongly the voting individual feels. Here are some examples of fractional votes and ways in which they *might* be intended and interpreted:

- +0: 'I don't feel strongly about it, but I'm okay with this.'
- -0: 'I won't get in the way, but I'd rather we didn't do this.'
- -0.5: 'I don't like this idea, but I can't find any rational justification for my feelings.'
- ++1: 'Wow! I like this! Let's *do* it!'
- -0.9: 'I *really* don't like this, but I'm not going to stand in the way if everyone else wants to go ahead with it.'
- +0.9: 'This is a cool idea and i like it, but I don't have time/the skills necessary to help out.'

Votes should generally be permitted to run for at least 72 hours to provide an opportunity for all concerned persons to participate regardless of their geographic locations.

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ok, ok but in
PRACTICE?
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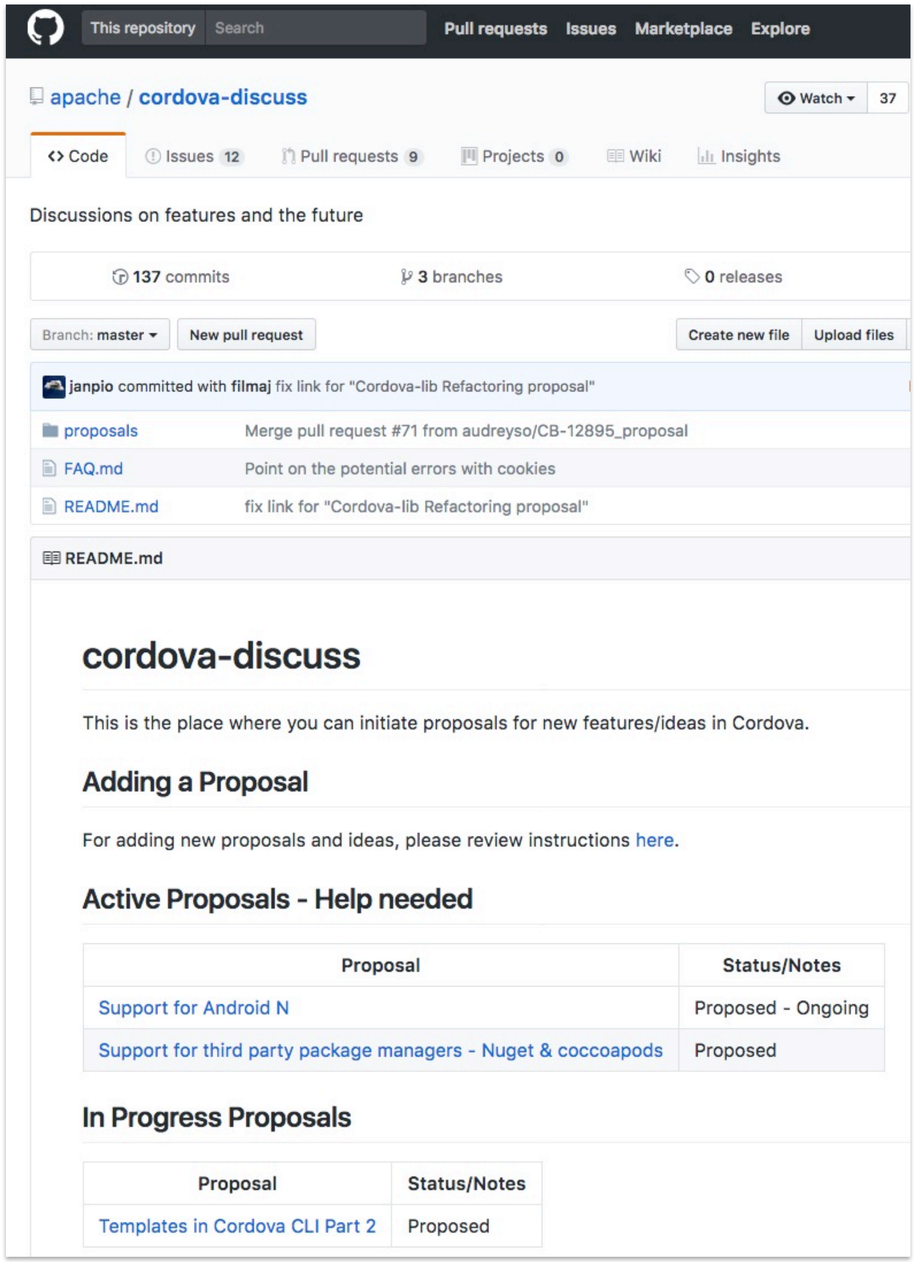
cordova-discuss



Suggested Process:

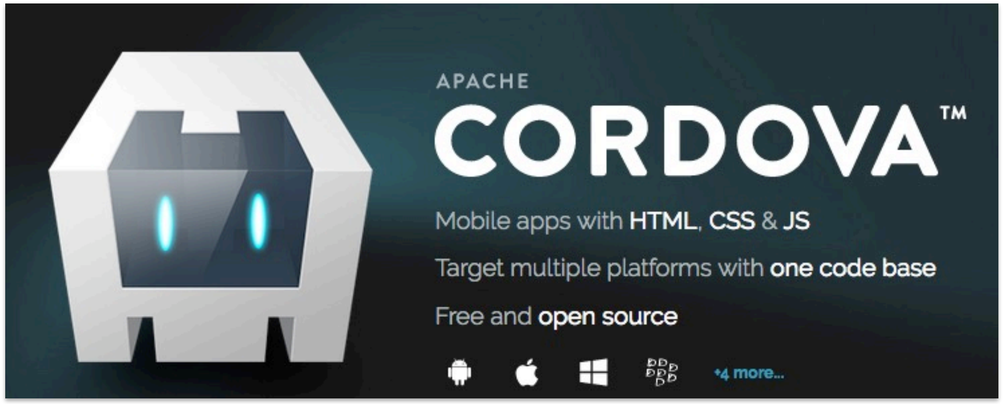
1. **Create an issue** with the description of the feature should be discussed.
2. Others can **discuss** about the proposal with **issue comments**
3. Once there is a rough **consensus**, create a **new file** in this folder with the proposal details.

…

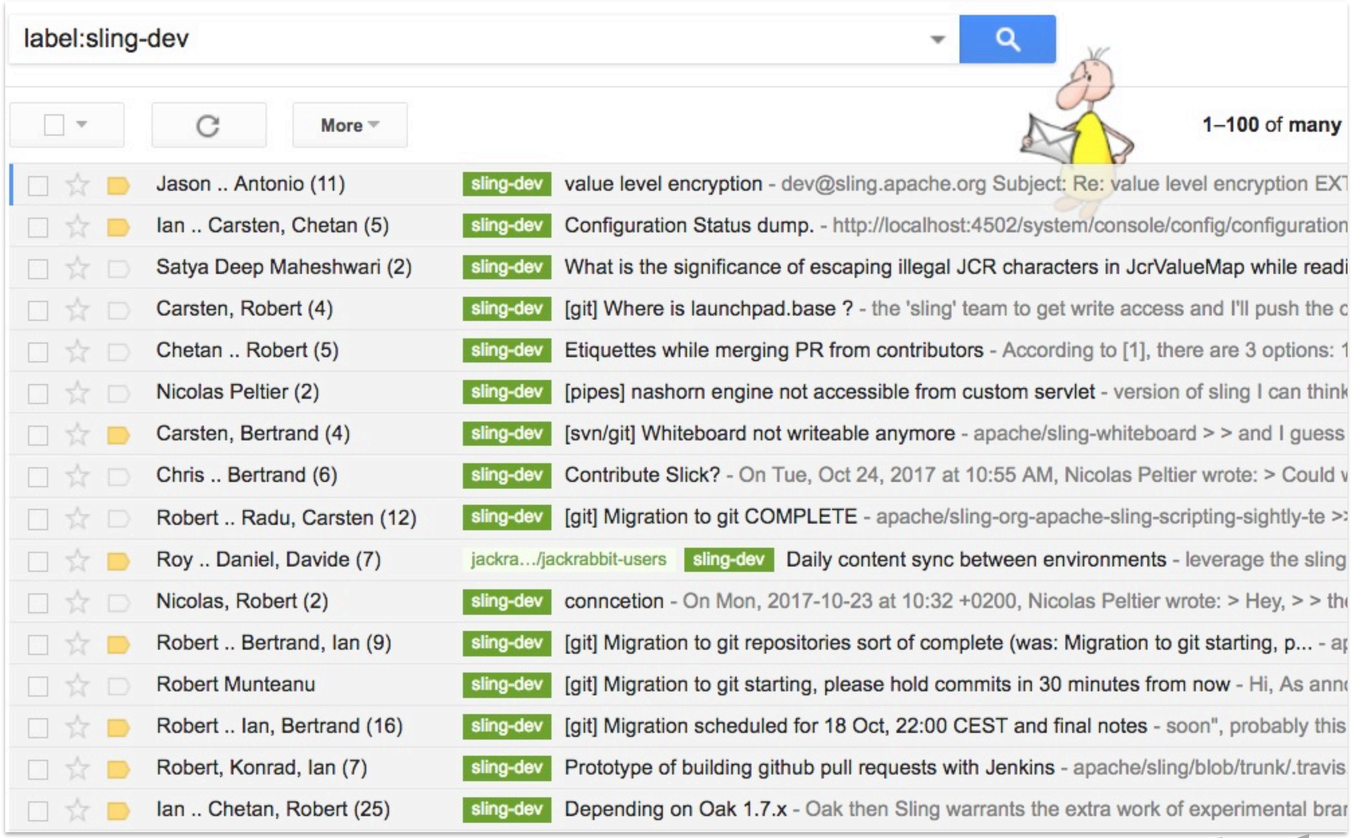
slightly different tools, similar process:
brainstorm -> options -> consensus -> decision

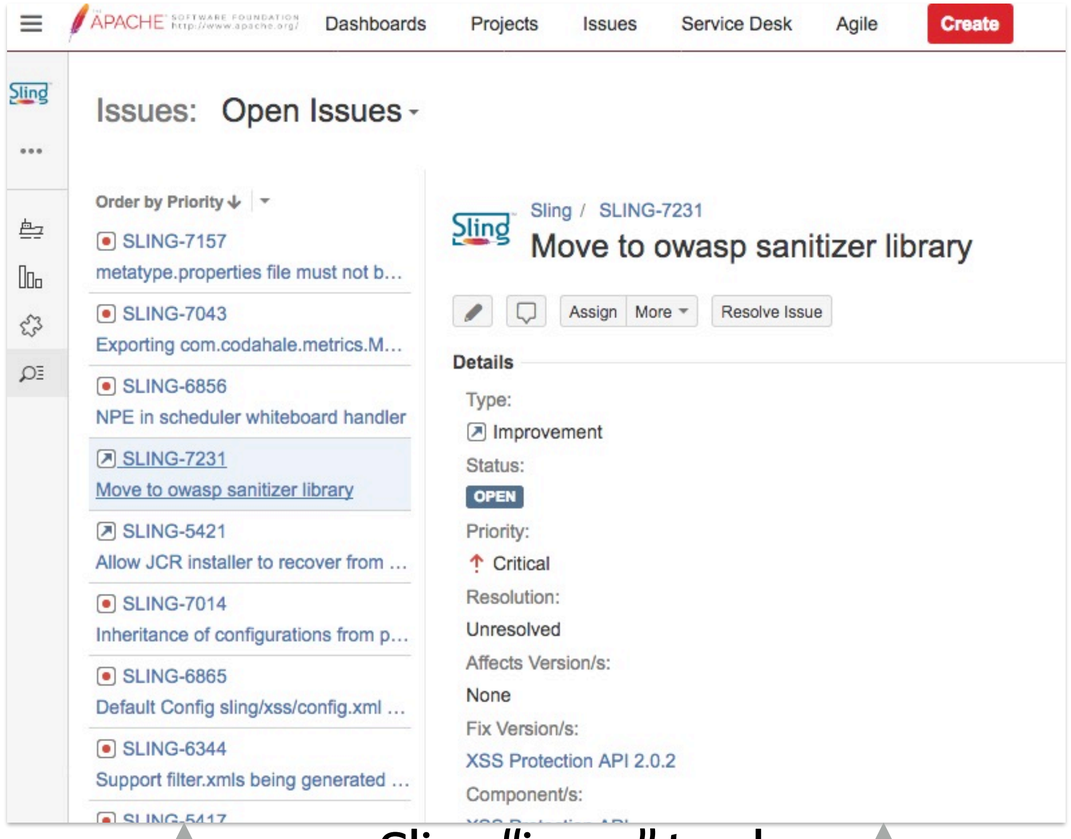
all asynchronous and traceable

https://github.com/apache/cordova-discuss



Apache project dev list + tracker

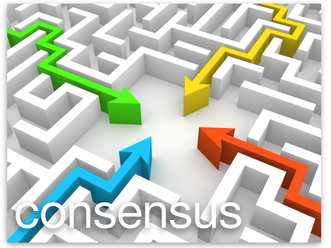




Sling developers mailing list

Sling "issue" tracker

Maybe a [VOTE]



ASF Board of Directors / Swiss Government

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And a project report header and discussion space is as simple as this:

```
E. Apache Blazinator Project [Bob Blazer / Bertrand]
  See Attachment E
  [ Blazinator.
    approved: bd, mm, dd, db, jc, ldv
    comments:
      bd:  Not sure why LEGAL-123 blocks their release
      ldv: They are waiting for the committer to supply
           an updated iCLA as the received one was
           incomplete.
      bd:  Ok, thanks, approving the report then.
  ]
```

Dead simple single text file + version control for case management.

https://www.apache.org/foundation/board

Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

- The agenda is presented in colour-coded form. The orange list contains uncontested items of business, which are usually approved swiftly. The blue list consists of responses to parliamentary requests. The items on the white list are discussed and decided one by one due to their political importance; occasionally, the discussions can be spread over a number of meetings. And the green list contains confidential items of business, which are also discussed in detail.

Color-coded lists of agenda items on paper to structure meeting.

https://www.admin.ch/gov/en/start/federal-council/tasks/decision-making/federal-council-meeting.html

Semi-async meetings - structured async preparation - similar principles!

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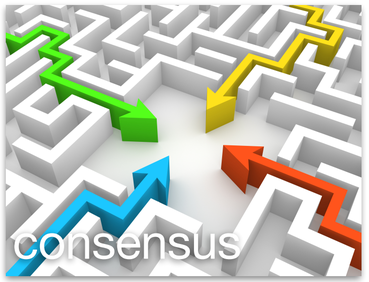
coda
are we done yet?
Be
Klebebande

This works!

shared async
comms channel



shared case
management tool

…as demonstrated by some world-changing Open Source projects over the years!

Switching between tools requires practice - adapt to your culture!

The exact tools are not important but their *roles* are:
central async channel + consensus building rules case management

I'm @bdelacretaz, thanks!
Reading list: https://pinboard.in/u:bdelacretaz/t:collaboration
Requirements for open development channels:
https://github.com/bdelacretaz/opendev-channel-requirements

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