

INSPIRED COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE AND MUSIC AT THE METRO

By Lewis E. Frees, Ph.D.

A man sat at a metro station in Washington D.C. on a cold January morning and started to play the violin. He played Bach for about 45 minutes. During that time, since it was rush hour, thousands of people went through the station, most of them on their way to work.

Three minutes went by and a middle aged man noticed there was musician playing. He slowed his pace and stopped for a few seconds and then hurried to meet his schedule. A minute later, the violinist received his first dollar tip: a woman threw the money in the till and without stopping continued to walk. A few minutes later, someone leaned against the wall to listen to him, but the man looked at his watch and started to walk again. Clearly he was late for work.

The one who paid the most attention was a 3-year old boy. His mother tagged him along, hurried but the kid stopped to look at the violinist. Finally the mother pushed hard and the child continued to walk, turning his head all the time. This action was repeated by several other children. All the parents, without exception, forced them to move on.

In the 45 minutes the musician played, only 6 people stopped and stayed for a while. About 20 gave him money but continued to walk their normal pace. He collected \$32. When he finished playing and silence took over, no one noticed it. No one applauded, nor was there any recognition.

No one knew it, but the fiddler standing against a bare wall outside the Metro in an indoor arcade at the top of the escalators was one of the finest classical musicians in the world, playing some of the most elegant music ever written on one of the most valuable violins ever made. Two days before his subway concert, Joshua Bell sold out at a theater in Boston and the seats averaged \$100 each. His performance was arranged by The Washington Post as an experiment in context, perception and priorities -- as well as an unblinking assessment of public taste: In a banal setting at an inconvenient time, would beauty transcend? Journalist Gene Weingarten was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing for his thought-provoking analysis of the experiment

Is that a story about taste? Or as some bloggers argued after the incident, did people quickly move on because a violin is too high pitched to be appreciated outside of a Metro stop? Is it yet one more allegory about how we are so harried that we don't take time to smell the roses? Or is it a simple case of confirmation bias created by the expectation that in that setting the quality of music would be mediocre at best? More than likely it is all of the above ... except for the children. I will return to them later.

In the presence of that set of triggers, the only thing that would have caused people to stop, pay attention and then to prize the concert would have been a high level of mastery at appreciating both Bach and violin music. To hear at a level that enabled people to distinguish virtuoso quality music while rushing to get somewhere is highly unlikely. That level of recognition would have had to occur in perhaps ten seconds in a milieu filled with distracting noise and contradicting triggers. Perhaps an

accomplished violin player would have picked up the information quickly enough ... or would have been curious long enough to stop and revel in the beauty that was coming her way.

Joshua Bell was sending out inspiring triggers that found no home. Suppose he had been positioned next to a well-crafted beautiful sign that said:

This is Joshua Bell. He is one of the most celebrated violinists in the world. He is playing some of Bach's most beautiful unaccompanied violin sonatas on a Stradivarius violin for which he paid over two million dollars. Bostonians recently paid \$200 per person to hear him. This concert is being brought to you by the Washington Post.

I would hazard a guess that the Metro would have had to deal with a massive congestion problem as the first few stopped and read the sign were quickly joined by others who also read the sign and finally joined by others who couldn't even see the sign but were attracted by the crowd.

Same Player, Same Music but an Entire Array of Additional Triggers

What would the sign have triggered? The graphics signaled: this is a class act. The brief intro to Joshua Bell and Bach signaled: this is a very high quality event. The price paid by Bostonians signaled: this is a bargain. The Washington Post reference signaled: generosity, opportunity and answered the core question, "Why would someone so famous come here and play for nothing?" The entire sign and its contents, along with the fact that it was occurring at a Metro stop, signaled: this is a rare opportunity.

In the presence of that palette of triggers, even those people who were not familiar with classical music may have brought to that moment all of the listening acuity and appreciation that they could muster. Experienced listeners would have been inspired. There would have no doubt been a quiet dynamic that moved through the crowd that, though unspoken, encouraged high quality listening and appreciation.

I predict that mothers would have nudged their children forward or placed them on their shoulders rather than tugging them away and that more than a few busy schedules would have been adjusted. My final prediction is that the concert would have ended with a roar of applause.

Now consider the actual array of triggers that were in play on that day. What was going through people's minds? "No really good musician would have cause to play at a metro stop." "If it is free, it isn't worth wasting my time for." "I have a schedule to meet."

Notice the difference in what people saw and heard between actual event and the hypothetical but completely plausible alternative.

- The difference in range of information ... appreciation for the quality of music that would have taken people to their own thresholds of understanding
- The shift in the crowd from independent, unrelated individuals to a collective temporarily-bonded by a common desire to share this event and more than likely signaling each other in ways that heightened the appreciation and reduced distracting triggers.

Picture yourself in each of the two scenarios just described. Notice the difference in instincts that each triggers in you ... from rushing on your way to prizing a rare opportunity to experience beauty. And imagine the difference in how you would have experienced the world including the people around you.

That difference is inspired. Inspired is a state in which we experience ourselves and the world around us from the context of our most lofty instincts. It is not limited to religious fervor, or those

flashes of insight in which new understanding bursts forth or those moments or hours or even days in which a high quality of creative and productive activity courses through us with such power, clarity and often beauty that it seems to be coming from somewhere else.

Inspiration can frame any moment and when it does, the world looks different. We experience the people around us differently. We see more and hear more and at a higher order. When inspiration frames an entire group that is engaged in joint activity, the product is inspired collective intelligence.

There are two types of experiments that help to explain what it is that creates *inspired* collective intelligence. The first is Jack Treynor's jelly-beans-in-the-jar experiment. The second we will call the trivial pursuit experiment.

Start With the Power of Collective Wisdom

Jack Treynor, the investment guru, conducted a now famous experiment in which he asked his class to estimate how many jelly beans there were in a jar. When added together and averaged, the group's estimate was 871. There were actually 850 beans contained within the jar. Only one student had made a better guess. The now famous jelly-beans-in-the-jar experiment has been replicated countless times with similar results. Invariably collective intelligence is superior to that of all but the occasional rogue genius.¹

Add the Power of Positive Triggers

The second experiment was conducted by Dutch social scientists.² Forty six of the hardest Trivial Pursuit questions were asked of two different groups of students. One group was asked to think about the idea of a college professor for a few moments before starting the game. The second group focused on soccer hooligans before starting the game. Those who focused on a college professor got over 57% right. Those who focused on soccer hooligans got just over 42% right. *That's a 26% difference in outcome caused by nothing but a difference in focus!*

The students did not even know they were being triggered. They had no idea that their performance was affected by their focus. Such is the power of triggers to affect collective intelligence. We continuously send these triggers to each other and to ourselves through the thoughts that we process.

Focus Those Triggers on People's Best Instincts

What distinguishes an inspired social network is that *people trigger each others' best instincts*. That is the secret to inspired collective intelligence. It starts with triggers ... those flashes of thought that sometimes connect us to the best in ourselves ... sometimes the worst ... and often to something in between. These triggers play a huge part in our individual and joint competence to solve problems and to render inspired outcomes.

What are best instincts? They are our most optimal version of our selves, pure and simple. Inspired collective intelligence is simply the product of a group of people interacting in a way that enables them to leverage the best that each of them brings to the conversation. When people trigger the best instincts of each other, they create collective outcomes that are *always* superior to anything that any of them could have produced alone. And these outcomes are more inspired than anything they could have produced together had anything other than their best instincts been triggered.

¹ This is one of scores of examples of the power of collective intelligence described in "The Wisdom of Crowds" by James Surowiecki.

² See Malcolm Gladwell, Blink,. For this and a series of other experiments in which triggers affect performance.

And You Get Inspired Collective Intelligence

When, within a network, people inspire the best instincts from each other, some amazing things happen. The network expands in size and diversity. The quality of network membership improves. Collective competence increases. People openly share more resources in the form of ideas. How can that be?

What are Triggers and What Do They Have to Do with Inspired Collective Intelligence?

A trigger is anything that sets off a response in us. It can emanate from our own thoughts or from something in the environment. We perpetually spark or trigger each other. A trigger created by someone else fires off a set of thoughts and feelings in you. These triggers ... either positive or negative ... can escalate in a self-reinforcing explosion. They may be disparaging or inspiring, cynical or hopeful, suspicious or trusting. They may invite a contest of ideas or the joint development of understanding. They can connect to your best or worst instincts or anywhere in between. The possibilities are endless.

In the Trivial Pursuit study, the researchers chose the focus ... think like a professor or soccer hooligan. The participants accepted that choice of focus even though they had no idea of the way in which their choice would affect their performance. When we pay attention to something, we trigger resonant feelings, beliefs, and understandings.

We exchange obvious triggers through language and non-verbal cues that are easy to read. But we also exchange them in countless subtle ways, many of which are non-conscious. Many of these triggers are so subtle that we don't even know that we are sending them or receiving them ... a look ... a roll of the eyes ... a word that activates an entire array of stereotypes.

We can trigger the highest and best instincts or those that are far less inspiring. We can trigger competence or incompetence. We can trigger hopes or fears ... inspiration or desperation. The trigger activates a set of beliefs which frames the meaning we make of it and that then pulls a constellation of competencies and behavioral attributes.

Competence Triggers and Inspired Triggers

There are two kinds of triggers that are critical to the development of inspired collective intelligence: competence triggers and inspired triggers. **Competence triggers** set off responses connected with effectiveness and are those which we most frequently use in companies. No matter what the task, they trigger us to do it well. Competence triggers, of course, won't do you any good if they are focused on the wrong thing. For example, if you are simply trying to get to work on time, they won't prompt you to stop and listen to Joshua Bell. They will just help you become accomplished at getting to work on time.

Competence triggers serve us well. Competence triggers alone accounted for a 25% difference in Trivial Pursuit scores. Competence triggers, depending on what they are focused on, help us to collectively think, analyze and perform more effectively. They pull performance from us. They activate mental acuity. Collective intelligence is produced when people think together effectively using competence triggers.

But let's look at what *inspired triggers* do for us. Inspired triggers connect us to our best instincts. They are the triggers of laughter and joy and love. They tie us to our higher, more inclusive values. They switch on the inner circuits that cause us to be moved by a piece of music when it is well conceived and masterfully delivered, no matter what the genre. In the presence of inspired triggers, we see and hear nuances and connections that we otherwise miss.

Inspired collective intelligence is a product of both competence and inspired triggers. When people are grappling for understanding and they exchange both competence and inspired triggers, the result is vibrant co-discovery. They are approaching each others' contributions with the same quality of listening that would cause them to be moved by Joshua Bell.

Now take that into your company. Most companies leave twenty-five percent of their smarts on the table. They not only don't use it, they don't even know that it is available. They are paying for good minds and then wasting twenty-five percent of the resource. What happened in the Washington Metro does not need to happen in your company. Just as surely as a well-crafted sign would have made music lovers out of thousands of metro riders, a shift in triggers can do the same for your company.

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