

## ***INSPIRED COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE***

*By Lewis E. Frees, Ph.D.*

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### **Introduction**

Everything that happens in an organization or any social system owes its origins to some form of shared thought. This collective intelligence can have global reach ... or be created by two lovers sitting in a bar sharing a drink. It can consist of simple observations about the weather or a deep probe into a pool of thinking that belongs to the ages. It can be the product of new understanding or simply reinforce and further burnish already existing opinions. It can set people against each other or bring them together on new common ground.

One way to think about inspired collective intelligence is to view it as a product of collective thought that has not been degraded by defensive positions whether they are based on simple cliques, professional disciplines, hierarchy, departmental silos, informal alliances or other boundaries of loyalty. It is what happens when people engage in human interchange solely from the context of their best instincts.

When this happens the boundaries that limit thought begin to dissolve. People naturally share the ownership of ideas. The range of thought expands in size and diversity. People interact with heightened awareness and openness to the contributions that each brings to the table.

This is a book about how to create collective intelligence that results in a palpable shift in the outcome ... a shift that is not only more intelligent - as in smarter - but also qualitatively different – as in new understanding.

In this chapter, I will provide a brief overview of why inspired collective intelligence matters, how to recognize it when you see it and the conditions that foster its achievement. Inspired collective intelligence is within the reach of any organization or for that matter any social system.

### **The Stakes are High**

Both the quality and velocity of collective thought are critical whether you have to address issues related to strategy or make a simple decision. Everything else follows. Every product, every decision, every service, every process and even the very culture of an organization are products of the intellect before they become action.

Even slightly degraded collective intelligence can lead to lost opportunity. So the stakes are high. More CEOs get fired as a result of flawed thinking than for poor execution. Poorly conceived strategy, no matter how well-executed is still poor strategy. When collective intelligence is degraded even slightly, it limits people's ability to see information that is right in front of their eyes.

Listen to people from Cisco Systems talk about the shift that occurred when they began to achieve inspired collective intelligence even though they never use the term.

*"The Boards and councils have been able to innovate with tremendous speed. Fifteen minutes and one week to get a business plan that used to take six months!"*  
John Chambers, CEO

*"Fiscal 2008 saw a tenfold increase in new projects. At the same time, operating expenses have been trimmed from about 38%, at the height of the tech boom, to between 35-36% today. We're shaving from 2-3% of profit off every dollar of revenue we get in."*<sup>1</sup>  
Ron Ricci, VP of Corporate Positioning

## The Inspired Difference: How You Recognize Inspired Collective Intelligence

What distinguishes inspired collective intelligence from that which is simply good enough? You can discern it in the quality of the intellectual outcome. It is always a new form ... common ground that reflects new understanding. It often reflects resolution of ideas that were thought to be in opposition.

You can also detect a striking contrast in the tone of the conversation itself. People affect each other differently. They trigger each others' best instincts. They are open-hearted and expansive. They convey an attitude of appreciation.

### Reaching the Point of Optimization

In *every interchange*, the quality of collective intelligence resides somewhere on a scale from failed to inspired, as illustrated in Figure 1 below: **Utilization of Collective Intelligence**.

## Utilization of Collective Intelligence



Figure 1

**8.5** is the collective intelligence optimization point. Inspired organizations always seek to consistently exceed 8.5. Here is the way Cisco describes what it means to operate at the optimization point.

<sup>1</sup> Ellen McGirt, *Cisco Gets Radical: How CEO John Chambers Is Turning the Tech Giant Into a Socialist Enterprise*, Fast Company, December 08/January 09, pp 88 ff.

*“Cisco operates as a distributed idea-engine where leadership emerges organically, unfettered by a central command. We want a culture where it is unacceptable not to share what you know. As a result, Cisco has become a laboratory of connectedness and productivity.”*

Cisco has **expanded the boundaries** (a distributed idea-engine), raised the **level of importance** of those new boundaries above the usual silos and hierarchy that exist in most organizations (where leadership emerges organically, unfettered by a central command ... and becomes a laboratory of connectedness and productivity) and **defined the behavior necessary for membership** (a culture where it is unacceptable not to share what you know). Every organization can fashion its own version of what Cisco has created for itself.

There is no intellectual boundary that cannot be breached by raising the level of collective intelligence to that of inspired ... no ideology, no economic self-interest, no national loyalty or, for that matter, no self-interest of any kind. Regardless of where people reside on the scale, they can trigger the instincts that move them further along the path. At the optimization point a qualitative shift occurs. Boundaries dissolve. People intuitively understand that individual identity is enlarged even while collective intellectual products are being created.

## Conditions That Foster Inspired Collective Intelligence

Inspired collective intelligence can seem natural when we are one of its co-creators and illusory when we are listening to others talk about it. Even as you read this, you could easily find yourself thinking: “Maybe it could happen at Cisco but not in my organization.” Fortunately, the right circumstances are within reach. Let’s take a look at some of those conditions including what we are discovering about our remarkable ability to influence the quality of intellectual outcomes in any organization.

There are three conditions that contribute to collective intelligence:

1. The first is dealing with real-time and over-time collective intelligence as part of the same phenomenon. Collective intelligence has both “here and now” and historical dimensions. Addressing one without understanding its impact on the other degrades both.
2. The second is drawing on the power of inspired triggers to raise the level of individual and collective intelligence.
3. The third is applying these first two conditions to the following five factors: building inspired **social networks**, growing a bank account of **social capital** that carries forward over time, generating **inspired conversations** that enable people to not only reach for common ground but also to create intellectual outcomes that explode out old boundaries of thought, evolving the **engagement process** and organizational design to foster flow in the forward movement of collective intelligence and mastering the tools of **individual thinking**.

Let’s take a deeper look at the first two of those conditions.

## The Real-Time and Over-Time Dimensions of Collective Intelligence

When we are developing shared thought in real-time, we both influence and are influenced by an ongoing stream of ideas. The present conversation always resides within a larger field of

collective intelligence that has both a present and historic dimension. We not only contribute to that legacy but it also influences the development of collective intelligence in the present.

This innate ability to leverage the collective learning of the past and evolve it forward into the future applies whether we are designing a new product, adjusting strategy or conferring with a customer. Failing to address both the historic and the present dimensions always degrades the one that is ignored, as the following story illustrates.

### A Federal Agency at Rest

A federal regulatory unit had been sleepily lumbering along doing its job for years. It wasn't highly regarded by the rest of the agency. In fact, some thought of it as a dumping ground for personnel that they wanted to move out of their respective units. Suddenly, due to new legislation, it became apparent that they were going to have to grow from 75-100 people to over 400 within 18 months. Furthermore, they would have many new responsibilities.

They brought in a bright new technically-competent executive to lead the transition. They immediately conducted an organizational analysis. As new requirements and regulations came in, they organized teams to identify and document new processes and procedures and to become far more detailed and specific about those processes that already existed. The new processes required heightened awareness and connectivity across the boundaries of former fiefdoms. They briefed everyone on the new processes.

But implementation was another matter altogether. People simply continued to do the same things they had always done. As new people were brought in, their briefing on the new processes was so cursory that when asked later, many didn't even know the new processes existed. The "throw it over the wall" mentality persisted with very little attempt to connect processes within departments - let alone across departments. People described the situation as chaos.

### What Went Wrong?

The real-time collective intelligence should have been a stunning success. They had organized teams to reengineer and document processes. They had specified points of connectivity. They had conducted briefings. The place should have been buzzing with ideas about how to not only use the processes but also to refine, adjust and document improvements. What kept the very people who had participated in developing the new processes from implementing them? Why weren't the new manuals alive with continuous changes and improvements?

What's more, why wasn't there a seismic shift in the *quality* of their intellectual outcomes? Why did they not clearly demonstrate the kind of intellectual excitement that seeds innovation and problem solving? Why wasn't there a continuous ferment of discovery? Why weren't

people comparing notes and filling in the missing pieces? How could it be that the new processes gained so little traction that new hires didn't even know about them?

Despite the best thinking by the people in the agency about improving and reinventing processes, the agency was overwhelmed by history. An underlying way of thinking deadened the natural momentum that could have followed the implementation of the process improvements. Over time, the agency had developed, refined and reinforced a powerful culture that was at odds with what was needed in order to implement the process improvements. This collective intelligence was about the safety in just doing your job and keeping your head low ... about getting by ... about how things will never really change.

This form of collective thought was powerful and pervasive. It was both communicated and reinforced in countless ways. It existed as a field of knowledge that operated below the level of normal awareness. The pervading culture had no doubt been the subject of occasional change management initiatives, and it had survived them all. It attracted people who found it to be a compatible environment and repelled people who did not. This collective thinking about the culture of the agency was sustained by the skill at producing "good enough" work so that it didn't attract undue attention. In this case, a culture that carried forward over-time, completely overwhelmed a well-conceived and participatory real-time implementation process.

This does not have to be the case. Collective intelligence that carries forward and continues to evolve over time can also be a medium that advances and even accelerates the development of joint thought.

### *When Collective Intelligence Evolves and Grows Over Time*

Christopher Bache observes his college students learning the same material faster in succeeding generations of students. In contrast to the deadening form of collective intelligence at the federal agency, he has to regularly adjust his course material forward to stay at the learning edge of students.

He knows how to enhance the likelihood that this field of shared knowledge will deepen and evolve so that his students will ever more quickly grasp and understand a set of concepts. His very bearing is picked up by his students. He ignites the best instincts in those students who are ready for it. Not all rise to the moment but those that do, join him in creating real-time collective intelligence that is inspired. And as successive generations of students move through his class, the velocity of learning increases.

Notice the implications for knowledge management. In addition to preserving the raw knowledge that has been developed in an organization, Bache is pointing to conditions in which succeeding generations of employees develop an ever-increasing ability to quickly grasp highly-valued qualities of an organizational culture.

It is possible to not only move this collective intelligence forward in the form of memory. It is also practicable to simultaneously raise its quality to a higher, more inclusive level. That is

quite a contrast to the deadening culture that is carried forward at the federal agency. But even in the case of the federal agency, it is possible to create new more enlightened pathways that are self-reinforcing and that provide fertile soil in which to sustain inspired collective intelligence in the present. The right triggers can shift the culture of that agency or for that matter any corporate culture with a velocity that will surprise.

Throughout this book, I will lay out concrete ways in which to enhance and accelerate this over-time form of learning.

We have all experienced those heightened moments when we have lost track of time and shifted into flow as ideas exploded during conversations, when challenges melted into solutions and egotistical turf dissolved. In those moments, we create products of thought that are superior to any that we could have produced alone. We relish and long to reproduce those events because they not only create inspired outcomes but also because they are also deeply satisfying. Those events do not have to be the exception. As a starting place, we need to remember to evolve both the historic and present dimensions of collective intelligence. Then we need to understand the second condition that determines joint thought ... the power of triggers to influence intellectual acuity.

### *The Power of Inspired Triggers*

Triggers are events, behaviors and language that connect you to a set of your thoughts. We perpetually spark or trigger each other. A trigger created by someone else can fire off a set of thoughts and feelings in you. Triggers may be disparaging or inspiring, cynical or hopeful, suspicious or trusting. They may invite a contest of ideas or the joint development of new shared understanding. We can trigger knowledge or ignorance, competence or incompetence ... inspiration or desperation. We can trigger the highest and best instincts or those that are mean-spirited and degrading. And, of course we can trigger anything in between.

Triggers have a dramatic influence on both individual and collective intelligence. Consider an experiment conducted by a group of Dutch social scientists.<sup>2</sup> 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 beginning. Those who focused on a college professor chose the right answer on just over fifty seven percent of the questions. Those who focused on soccer hooligans answered just over 42% correctly. *That's a 26% difference in outcome caused by nothing more than a difference in focus!* A college professor represents reasoned thought. Soccer hooligans, of course, are the epitome of chaos.

What is the optimal version of a thinker and problem solver? For those students it was a college professor. Focusing on a professor triggered the circuits ... the capabilities within each of them ... that were aligned with that trait. Therein lays the power of thin-sliced triggers.

### *We Grasp the Meaning of Triggers Even When We Are Not Aware of It*

We don't even have to be aware of the information that we are picking up in order to be influenced by it. Information that is sent and received so quickly that the exchange operates below the awareness of either the sender or the recipient is referred to as a *thin slice* because it is both instantaneously and seamlessly picked up and interpreted. We are all good at sensing the meaning of thin slices. In fact, we are so good at reading this information, without even thinking about it, that our instant take can be more accurate than trained observation. We seem to pick up and understand the meaning of thin-sliced information best

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

when we don't over-think it. Any athlete who has been in a slump knows what happens when you over-think your game.

Researchers, for example, have discovered that people who are trained to look for signs of lying don't score as well in accuracy tests as amateurs. People who were trained as experts at detecting lies tended to score lower than people who were not. The experts were so confident about their ability to detect liars that they learned to ignore thin-sliced information instead of leveraging it.

The Trivial Pursuit experiment triggered the way students think by creating two different models. So it would follow that when we are interacting with other people, the way they view us strongly influences our own mental acuity. Is this the case? It turns out that it is ... even with senior citizens. For example in one experiment, prior to testing older adults, they were subliminally presented terms relating to the words elderly. Some were presented with negative terms such as *senile* and *dementia*. Others were presented with positive terms such as *wise* and *experienced*. When given memory tests, each group's memory fell in line with the subliminally presented terms, even though the subjects were unaware that they were being influenced.<sup>3</sup>

And it is not only the content of the thin slices that trigger our intellectual performance, it is also the attitude that accompanies it. We now know what we have suspected all along. Positive attitudes heighten the ability of a group to deal with complex ideas and to formulate out-of-the-box solutions. Marcial Losada has developed a mathematical model that shows what happens on business teams when a 3-to-1 ratio is reached between positive vs. negatives attitudes as registered in actual behavior. At 2.901-to-1, a tipping point is reached when the team shifts into the creative elaboration and exploration of ideas vs. one that dead ends its ideas. Positive attitudes are contagious and are an important component of inspired collective intelligence.

Triggers create pull that energizes or degrades the effectiveness of every one of the five factors that I mentioned above. They have an impact on the cohesiveness, diversity and general effectiveness of social networks. They either build or undermine social capital. They either help to create conversations that flow fluently, deeply, creatively with a sense of inquiry and dialogue or they create conversations that are contentious, competitive and even toxic. They emanate from the thoughts we initiate as we interpret the messages sent by other people.

I will be citing a wide array of studies and stories that demonstrate the power of triggers to create enormous shifts in our ability to exercise the power of thought both individually and collectively. Some are counter-intuitive such as studies in which people have been able to slow the aging processes. Others may simply reinforce what you already know: If you want to push the boundaries of thought you have to trigger higher more inclusive instincts of ever broader connectedness.

There are countless ways in which we trigger each other's instincts. And in all cases, those thin slices leave their mark. They can cause us to improve or diminish our mental acuity, to approach each other with openness and appreciation or go down paths of anger and recrimination, to welcome and further evolve ideas or build walls around our mental constructs. And the conditions that govern these triggers apply to any group of any size from nation states, to virtual strangers twittering. In every case, these triggers can be changed in a way that improves the quality of collective intelligence.

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<sup>3</sup> Levy,B(1996), Improving memory in old age through implicit self-stereotyping. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60(2), 254-262. As cited Ran Hassin, James Uleman and John Bargh, *The New Unconsciousness*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005.

## A Change of Focus

Einstein famously observed that we can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking that created them in the first place.

Remember when we took it as a given that we couldn't expect a moderately priced car engine to last over one hundred thousand miles without a ring job or a complete engine overhaul? Remember the days before the words "fit and finish" were introduced? Ed Deming brought statistics to the control of processes, and created total quality management (although he was never comfortable with the "M" in TQM) and the auto industry has never been the same. We now take it as a given that doors close without rattling and engines don't emit black smoke out the exhaust.

The journey to inspired intellectual processes is different from that for tangible products such as automobiles. Intellectual processes cannot be improved by statistical process control because they self-organize. As they evolve, they change. But the level of rigor that Deming, and those that followed him, brought can indeed be applied to the development of intellectual outcomes and that is what I have set out to do in this book.

Einstein also observed: "It would be possible to describe everything scientifically but it would make no sense. It would be without meaning. What if you described a Beethoven Symphony as a variation in wave pressure?"

People often describe the experience of inspired collective intelligence with the language of aesthetics rather than wave pressure. They describe it in terms of mood and attitude ... as highly satisfying ... so much so that when they are not operating that way they yearn to repeat it. They speak of a sense of community that develops among those that create inspired collective intelligence ... a connectedness that transcends intellectual turf or silos or hierarchy. They use words like timeless because the collective intelligence carries forward. They speak of the way in which invention and innovation accelerate, with less stress and of seeing with better eyes what others miss.

Perhaps, most importantly, people talk about letting go of attachment to former intellectual constructs. Not that they suddenly reject all of the old in order to take on the new. They instead evolve forward with their thinking, letting go of the unnecessary and appreciating those ideas that add value in a new context. In this manner, inspired collective intelligence transforms the contents in the old containers that the original boundaries were designed to protect so that they become more inclusive. As silos and other barriers dissolve, far from destroying individual specialties, inspired collective intelligence enlarges, further defines and incorporates them into new understanding.

In order for this to occur, people have to divest their selves of the assumption that if they engage in collective thought, they somehow erode their individual identity. They have to recognize that even their most personal contributions ride on thoughts that have been spun by others; that every insight that they claim as their own is in the debt of countless ideas of others through which they have picked and chosen.

So let's shift our outlook and begin by getting over the belief that individual identity is eroded when we engage in collective intelligence that is inspired. Individual identity only suffers when we build and carefully maintain boundaries around the products of our thought and

protect them from evolving and expanding. Contributing to inspired collective intelligence actually enhances individual identity.

We all celebrate our individual contributions and take great satisfaction in them especially when we synthesize seemingly irreconcilable ideas into eureka moments. We own our unique take. But our stamp always carries something forward that was already there. And we frequently fail to understand that all who contribute to the expansion of collective intelligence, experience an expansion of their own uniqueness even while they experience their connectedness to the larger group.

Behind every intellectual boundary there are people ready to breach it ... capable of connecting to a set of values and inclinations and instincts that take them to a loftier, more inclusive level. When people's best instincts are awakened, they feel far greater connection, loyalty and community with others like themselves who have been inspired to dissolve limited thought boundaries.

Let's learn to elevate the subtle thin-sliced messages that are continuously exchanged. Let's become increasingly more effective at triggering the best instincts in others and recognizing them in ourselves. That is the purpose of this book.

We will examine the leadership attributes that foster the qualities found in inspired organizations. We will also carefully look at the specific steps that will move you forward including how to create inspired social networks, how to build a bank account of social capital that carries forward over time, how to create inspired conversations that enable people to not only reach for common ground but also to create intellectual outcomes that explode out old boundaries of thought. We will explore the processes and organization design that affect the quality of engagement that influence the flow of collective intelligence. Perhaps, most importantly, we will delve into the role of individual thinking in creating collective intelligence that is inspired.

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