

WHAT DO SOCIAL NETWORKS HAVE TO DO WITH INSPIRED COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE?

By Lewis E. Frees, Ph.D.

What comes to mind when you think of social networks? Linked-in? Twitter? Live Oak 360? The blogosphere? Chances are what does **not** come to mind is that social networks are the central nervous system of collective intelligence in your organization. They are far more than simply webs of connections in which individuals share information about themselves or, at most, post ideas for reaction.

Whether your knowledge requirements are complex (all the specialties required to bring a new product to market) or miniscule (a simple answer to a problem) the responsiveness and fluidity of your social networks are crucial to your success.

At their best, social networks coalesce the best thinking of individuals into a quality of wisdom that far exceeds what would be expected if contributions were simply aggregated. At their worst, they are purveyors of group-think: consensus at a low common denominator. At their best, they connect people to lofty values. At their worst, they reinforce all of the biases and baser instincts of their members. At their best, they trigger great riches of individual and collective intelligence. At their worst, they degrade the very talent, intelligence and expertise that they are designed to leverage.

The Ingredients of Inspired Social Networks

There are many ingredients that, when combined, create social networks that have the power to drive inspired collective intelligence.

- They are diverse. They recognize, attract and leverage the optimal “soup” of people from which to create collective wisdom
- They leverage technology to keep people seamlessly connected.
- They mine collective intelligence that is the product of disciplined thought and they do it in a way that is analogous to open source software. Out of their seeming chaos emerges profound understanding and the ability to anticipate the future far in advance of others.

But there is one additional attribute that moves them up an additional notch and that is the subject of this white paper.

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.

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?

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.

Lessons from the Latrero

The award-winning short film titled: *historia de la latrero* opens with series of shots of people enjoying a beautiful day in a Mexican plaza near a fountain. Birds sing. Children play. People smile and laugh.

The camera then pans on a blind beggar sitting by the fountain with a crude sign that reads: "I am blind. Please have compassion." People pass him by and a few carelessly toss coins his way. Some land on the ground. Some find their way into the can.

Then a well-dressed man in a business suit walks by, stops, comes back and reads the sign. The blind man senses him there and touches his foot. The man takes out his pen. He picks up the sign, turns it over and writes a new message then leaves. Passersby start past the beggar. They stop. They read the sign and begin to put money in his can. The camera pans on the can as coins and even bills are placed in it. The blind man obviously pleased with his new found abundance feels the concrete, picking up even more coins that missed his can.

Later the stranger reappears and again stands in front of the blind man who touches his foot and recognizes him. In a brief exchange which represents the only dialogue in the movie he asks the man what he wrote on the sign. The stranger says, "I wrote the same message but in different words," and leaves. The movie closes as the new words on the sign appear on the screen: "It is a beautiful day and I can't see it."

What the Sign Triggered

The new sign triggered the best instincts in people by connecting them to their own appreciation of the beautiful day and the contrast between their ability to casually enjoy it and the blind beggar's inability to see it. They instantly got the difference and shared resources with him. A small difference in language triggered the best instincts of passersby which, in turn, created a dramatic expansion of network size and resources.

Triggers are exchanged quickly and habitually. We don't even notice most of them ... but they affect us. A simple difference in focus produced a 26% difference in performance among the students. A simple shift in language created an expanded and more generous social network for the beggar. That is why we are in the business of helping the people individually and collectively shift the way they think.

Now let's revisit the other three qualities of an inspired social network: diversity, technology and thoughtful conversation.

Diversity: The Key to Avoiding Disastrous "Group Think"

Social networks are often blind to the very diversity of thinking that makes the difference between an inspired network and a large version of "group-think". If network diversity, including those contrarian opinions that challenge current assumptions, is not introduced *early and continuously*, the result can be miscalculations that are costly or even fatal.

We don't have to look any further than the current financial and housing markets to see what happens on an international scale when self-reinforcing collective thought, fueled by its own exuberance, is devoid of continuously persuasive contrarian thinking. Every industry that is in trouble now, limited the diversity of its social networks early on. All of the information that it needed was staring it in the face but was either missed or resisted.

Inviting contrarian opinions into a social network is often counterintuitive. How do you keep your collective thinking from going awry? You invite someone who is outside of your current thought system to help you make sure that you leverage and optimize diverse and contrarian thought, early and continuously.

Technology: Enabling Social Networks with Global Reach

So now let's revisit the role of technology. Thanks to technology, social networks can be unlimited in size, reach around the globe and continuously move collective thinking forward.

Through technology we know how to connect an unlimited array of people with a level of continuity that could only be dreamed of before. We now know how to use social network software to develop thought and leverage collective intelligence instead of simply using it for posting ideas. And, more importantly we know how to develop inspired networks ... networks in which people are exchanging triggers that harvest that additional 26% that occurs when people operate from their best instincts.

Thoughtful Interchanges that Create Profound Collective Wisdom

Inspired collective intelligence is the product of thoughtful discourse: the type that in times past could only occur in synchronous interchanges such as face –to-face meetings and conference calls. Something amazing happens on the way to the development of collective intelligence when a social network is facilitated and operated like open source software. Contrarian thoughts emerge. Ideas deepen, evolve and are continuously enriched.

Facilitation Makes It Happen

For every outcome or intellectual challenge or task in your organization, there is an optimal social network that expands in resources, size and diversity when people trigger each others' best instincts. It doesn't matter what business you are in. Think of what would happen if you could create a 26% improvement in your collective intelligence. That is what we facilitate ... finding the optimal network with high diversity ... leveraging technology ... fostering conversations that trigger the best instincts of the members ... guiding the thought process so that it truly leverages the collective intelligence that is inherent and just waiting to be put to use.

Lewis E. Frees, Ph.D. is president of Harmony, Inc. (<http://www.harmonyinc.com>) an organizational development consulting firm. Lew has been a practicing consultant, trainer and corporate coach for over twenty five years. He has written numerous articles on leadership, management and organizational change. This article is based on the book he is currently authoring: Inspired Collective Intelligence: Leveraging the Best Thinking in Your Organization. Among the services offered, include intellectual value stream mapping, social network mapping, pull analysis, 360° feedback surveys, and collaborative software application to support the implementation of the five competencies needed to create an inspired organization.