

THE TWENTY-SIX PERCENT DIFFERENCE: HOW INSPIRED COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE CAN HELP COMPANIES THRIVE IN CHALLENGING TIMES

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No matter how well you execute, you will only succeed if you execute on the right thing.

The Twenty-Six Percent Difference

Most companies leave twenty-six 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-six percent of the resource. Waste of any kind, of course, degrades the bottom line. And when the economy is in the tank, no company can afford waste. But waste of high quality collective thought can undermine the ability to quickly reset and seize opportunities that competitors miss. That can be debilitating.

The secret to that additional twenty-six percent lies in creating inspired collective intelligence. Inspired collective intelligence is, to the way people think together, what lean is to the processes the Japanese instituted for manufacturing. Anyone who is familiar with lean manufacturing methods understands the exponential increase in cost that is exacted as defects move through a manufacturing line. They also understand the revolution in quality that Toyota and Honda have unleashed as a result. The Japanese invested in process improvement when they were regarded as non-competitive in the world auto market. At the very moment when their backs were to the wall, they invested rather than retrenching.

As in the case of lean manufacturing, "defects" in collective intelligence are easily missed. And defects in a thinking process can be far more devastating to a company's viability than one that simply requires the replacement of a part.

Inspired collective intelligence closes the twenty-six percent gap. It enables companies to access the entire diversity of aptitude, intelligence, acumen, experience and just plain smarts that now exists throughout their company and mine it continuously. The result is a quality of collective intelligence that far exceeds what anyone could have produced alone. Because of that twenty-six percent, they are joined ... when they most need it ... by people who have the very diversity of ideas that enable them to get it right the first time.

In order to squeeze out that extra twenty-six percent, people get so practiced at creating inspired collective intelligence that they are able to apply it to anything that matters from strategy to simple decisions

Invaluable? We agree. Impossible? Not true. Read on.

Collective Intelligence Can Be Smarter Than Any Individual in a Group

There is now an impressive body of research that shows that under the right conditions, collective intelligence can produce intellectual outcomes that are superior to that of even the most expert of individuals in the group. It turns out that the old saw that “a camel is a horse designed by a committee” need not be the case. For a good overview of this research, that looks at the way collective intelligence applies to everything from gambling to the stock market, take a look at the book, [The Wisdom of Crowds](#), by Surowiecki.¹

Can is the operative word here, because as we all know, just bringing people together does not create automatic brilliance. But we do know the conditions under which diverse social networks, high social capital, information-rich conversations and seamless engagement processes when combined with effective individual thinking can produce collective intelligence that is superior to that of all but the occasional rogue genius.

But we don't have to stop there. Another body of research by social psychologists shows the power of triggers on performance. Our individual focus has a powerful influence on not only physical performance and strength as every athlete knows, but also can affect our intellectual performance.

Competence Triggers Raise the Bar

A team of Dutch social scientists identified forty six of the hardest Trivial Pursuit questions and recruited two different groups of students to try their hand at collectively answering the questions.² 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 correctly answered just over 57% of the questions. Those who focused on soccer hooligans were correct on only 42%. 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 competence triggers to affect collective intelligence. We continuously send these triggers to each other and to ourselves through the thoughts that we process.

Inspired Triggers Raise it Further

But there is also another type of trigger. These are the triggers that inspire us to our best instincts. They trigger our higher values. Research show that value triggers make people both happier and *more effective*. In other words when people are operating out of their best instincts, they make better decisions, they see information that others miss and they are less vulnerable to confirmation bias ... the tendency to only recognize information that aligns with our own current thinking.

What distinguishes *inspired* collective intelligence 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. Both competence and best instinct triggers play a huge part in our individual and joint capacity to solve problems and to render inspired outcomes.

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.

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 both the competence and the best instincts of each other they create collective outcomes that are always superior to anything that any of them could have produced alone.

How do you know if you are wasting a portion of the gold mine of potential collective intelligence in your organization? You can start by asking some pointed questions.

- What kind of competence triggers do people typically exchange? Do they signal respect for the intellect and competence of each other or do they reinforce their own self-esteem at the expense of others?
- What kind of instincts do they trigger? Do they appeal to the best or worst instincts of the people with whom they interact?
- How do they deal with diversity of opinion? Do they welcome or push against contrarian ideas?
- Do they consistently build a bank account of social capital? Do they approach each other in a way that builds trust and respect and appreciation?
- Do they dialogue in a way that expands and evolves ideas in order to create new understanding or do they compete over and defend the boundaries of current thinking?
- Do they use engagement processes that enable them to create a seamless flow of collective intelligence even across time and space?
- Do they stay focused on possibilities instead of limitations? Do they find the values and strengths in others rather than looking for their vulnerabilities?

Inspired collective intelligence requires that care, attention and behavioral mastery be applied to the issues implicit in every one of those questions ... every one. And it starts at the top. But it can be achieved. And when guided by astute leadership in combination with abundant learning opportunity, it sets off a contagion that can be spread throughout an entire organization. It leaves its mark on every activity that requires thought. Can you afford anything less?

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