

COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE

BY SETH KAHAN

Collective Intelligence is the synergy that takes place when a group's know-how exceeds the sum total of Individual contributions.

The old business model has changed. Businesses recognize that their chief asset is *what their people know*. Building internal communities improves the social fabric of an organization, making collective intelligence possible. **Collective intelligence has the capacity to drive business acceleration.**

Building internal Business Performance Communities¹ can improve the social fabric of an organization, making collective intelligence possible.

Collective intelligence is cultivated two ways:

- (1) *Complimentary Programs* that support the organization's strategic objectives. These programs rely on the development of interpersonal skills in order to improve performance. For example, mentoring programs, communities of practice, alliance development between silos.
- (2) *Strategic Interventions* designed to develop the capacity for a core need, such as identifying emergent trends.

Different Approaches, Different Tactics.

The development of *complimentary programs* is a traditional change process that introduces clearly defined relationship-based skill-sets to develop and leverage social capital. As in most change a process, the desired state has been clearly established, but effecting the human change requires dedicated resources for the infamous triumvirate, *Support, Training and Communications*.

For example, setting up a mentoring program requires:

- * Training participants in active listening and counseling skills
- * Face-to-face interactions which allow people to screen and select partners
- * Communication, training and support to develop the program successfully.

The development of a *strategic intervention* to build the capacity for specific core needs requires an extensive review of the specific attributes of core needs along with the development of an "information collection strategy." An information collection strategy identifies the type of trends one is looking for and matches known attributes of these trends with potential attributes of future events.

For example, if a growing private-sector company wanted to collect intelligence from the marketplace in order to identify emerging business opportunities. Toward

¹ Business Performance Communities by Seth Kahan, available online at www.SethKahan.com/Resources/0BPCs.html

this end, they would form a community which includes external business partners and competitors.

To shield the identified emerging opportunities from public knowledge, criteria are used to collect and aggregate information individually, but not collectively. This special task is reserved for designated members of the business intelligence unit. They are the ones who "put the pieces of the puzzle together" and identify events that are beginning to take shape.

To understand how to facilitate this type of information sharing, it is helpful to look at recent thinking regarding emergence which involves the study of ant colonies². Ants exhibit higher order behavior, and yet have no command-and-control hierarchy. Instead there are a limited number of communication signals which take place literally ant-to-ant. When large numbers of ants follow these communication signals exactly (as ants do) there emerges a higher-level response from the colony, such as identifying preferred food sources or changing the number of ants dedicated to a specific task.

Similarly, individuals within an intelligence community can be provided with instructions which describe how they can mix and match their data. These instructions result in the identification of trends by the Business Intelligence Unit. The unit takes these trends into consideration as it develops recommendations for emerging opportunities. At the same time the trends remain out of reach of the individuals holding the data. In essence, the social

² EMERGENCE: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities and Software; Steven Johnson, Simon and Schuster, 2002

fabric delivers value to the organization that is not available to an individual community member. This type of information screening may be required in circumstances where the individual's knowledge must remain limited in order to be effective.

In other instances, individuals can be shown the totality of the information available. Groupware is an effective way to do this. This process enables participants to develop a holistic model of the intelligence universe to improve their performance. It is an excellent way to develop knowledge workers; i.e., individuals who must develop and apply know-how as part of their work.

"Business Performance Communities" are an excellent way to establish *collective intelligence*. Now recognized as valuable contributors complimenting the command-and-control structure in traditional, hierarchical organizations, these ecological entities are capable of providing valuable solutions to dilemmas that have plagued traditional management for decades.



"Seth Kahan helps participants form lasting communities in which they share their knowledge, enhancing the organization's efficiency, innovation and productivity."

The Wall Street Journal

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