

The Power of Collective Wisdom and the Trap of Collective Folly
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Berrett-Koehler, 2009

Reviewed by Leland Beaumont

Hang together or hang separately!

What happens when a group faces a difficult problem? In some circumstances the group arrives at an extraordinary solution that was unknown to any individual at the start of the deliberations. In other cases the group settles on a decision that becomes tragic, even though many in the group thought better of it. What are the conditions that can allow a group to access their combined wisdom? How can we connect with each other and tap into our cocreative abilities? What conditions allow a group to fall into miserable folly?

The book begins with the story of the 1949 Mann Gulch fire tragedy and uses it to differentiate individual skill and personal wisdom from collective wisdom. Then inspiring stories of unexpected success resulting from extraordinary sportsmanship, the commitment of a mom to transform an industry for the sake of the children, and the courage of a peasant to speak up and offer an idea that helped transform the United Farm Workers each demonstrate the power of collective wisdom.

Chapter three is dedicated to describing synchronicity, collective conscience, and the noosphere. Beliefs of Carl Jung, Albert Einstein, Pierre de Chardin, Mary Follett, and Ralph Waldo Emerson are sampled to support these controversial theories. Because I choose to remain trapped in a causal universe I remain skeptical of these concepts. The chapter begins with an ambitious premise but delivers only a junior varsity performance, except when describing Mary Follett's ideas on the importance of "power with" rather than "power over".

The five stances for collective wisdom are described in chapter four. These are: 1) deep listening—an authentic curiosity about what is going on inside the speaker, 2) suspending uncertainty—deferring judgment and allowing a new truth to emerge, 3) seeing whole systems and seeking diverse perspectives—seeking the origins of positive deviance through appreciative inquiry to understand solutions that now exist within the system, 4) respect for others and group discernment, and 5) welcoming all that is arising—embracing unexpected participants and allowing unplanned events to contribute to the solution. A constant trust in the transcendent provides the confidence and patience often required for the connections to be made and the wisdom to emerge.

Three chapters describe many tragedies of collective folly. One of two conditions emerge in the group and inevitably lead to this folly. The group may separate and fragment so that one faction attacks another. This may be the rich against the poor, the engineers against the managers, the powerful against the vulnerable, the educated against the illiterate, the young against the old, or any form of us against them. Alternatively, the group may settle on an illusion of an agreement rather than an authentic and enduring commitment. This can happen when voices within the collective are suppressed and not heard—when time pressures, or temporary momentum, or shouting, or ego, or shame, or fear, or power differentials discourage or marginalize some people or ideas. This folly is illustrated with tragic stories of unfounded certainty about Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq, group polarization that fails to prevent thousands of deaths from childbed fever despite knowing the simple cause, and illusions of agreement suppressing warnings that could have prevented the Apollo 1 fire and the Challenger space shuttle disaster.

Roman playwright and freed slave Terence declared: “I am a human being. Nothing that is human is alien to me.” If we can hold on to this profound belief the collective cannot possibly fragment to draw us away from wisdom.

The book concludes with a chapter on mindfulness, an essential skill for encouraging collective wisdom to emerge. The four mindfulness practices described are: 1) creating safe spaces for inquiry, 2) enable deep listening, 3) shift attention from individual experts to group expertise, and 4) ask essential questions.

I read the Kindle edition of this book. Typographical errors that would be considered egregious in a printed version are rampant in the Kindle version. Amazon, the publishers, and authors need to work collectively to eliminate these annoying, distracting, and ugly errors that mar an otherwise artful product.