Collective Intelligence, Communal Mind,
and the Ecology of Wisdom

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ABSTRACT
This article is a condensed version of an unpublished larger work, portions extracted, here, to meet conference page length restrictions. The larger paper presents a complex model of the factors that contribute to organisational wisdom, called here the Wisdom Ecosystem. While explication of the model (see Figure 1) and its dynamics exceeds current scope, it provides essential context for this abridged paper. Emphasis, here, is on the four primary aspects of the Wisdom Ecosystem: three comprising the work’s title and original focus of this study, Collective Intelligence, Communal Mind, and the Wisdom Ecology, and a fourth, which emerged as prominent unexpectedly in the course of model-building, Dialogue.

Keywords:
- Organisational Consciousness
- Organisational Learning
- Systems Dynamics
- Complexity

INTRODUCTION
There has never been such urgency and potential to seize opportunities and solve problems of global consequence as exists right now. The interconnectedness of all life and all things was once only a spiritual notion reflective of simpler times and observed in man’s intimate relationship with nature. It is now dramatically revealed in global crises and other worldwide phenomena, and appreciation of this fact is growing. Nonetheless, we continue to consume and endanger in ways that simply are unsustainable. Our disregard for nature and the future of mankind is not because we are uninformed, uneducated, or unintelligent. The “system” drives our behaviour (Husted, 1993). The system, however, is not something “out there,” out to get us and beyond our control. We are integral parts of the system. If we want change we must first understand the systems in which desired change is embedded (Husted, 1993). This article helps readers see and contend with complex systems.

Collective Intelligence, Communal Mind, and the Ecology of Wisdom applies concepts of systems and complexity theory to dynamics of organisational performance, including and especially learning and change. A Causal Loop (relationship) Diagram is used to present a model of those dynamics, conceived here as the Wisdom Ecosystem (see Figure 1). Wisdom is a characteristic and product of a set of mutually-supporting factors, conditions, and relationships—the ecosystem. Thus, this article is concerned with the nature of wisdom and the environments that both depend on and enable it. The direct application is organisations and institutions, but with minor modifications the model can be scaled down to the team or work group level or up to communities and even societies. As a starting point, it is taken as given that organisational wisdom is both desirable and possible.
Organisational wisdom is the collective wise thinking and acting of an organisation as a whole. More often than not, the organisation will do the right thing, given thoroughgoing understanding of itself, including its capabilities, mission, and values, and its environment (Hays, 2007). Doing the right thing has elements of prudence, ethics, and higher-order virtues. As used here, wisdom implies “big picture” understanding, including appreciation for the far-reaching implications of action and inaction. This is how systems thinking and mapping link to wisdom. A wise organisation, as conceived here, is populated by wise individuals: it recruits, develops, and enables them to think and act wisely, both independently and collectively.

Human beings are inherently brilliant. We possess the ingenuity to solve most problems, create and appreciate beauty, and cultivate environments in which people and ideas can flourish. While we have vast potential, we limit ourselves and each other. Our individual behaviour towards one another, the systems we employ, and the institutions we build all work – unintentionally – to dampen our creativity, courage, and collaboration. While rhetoric asserts the need for learning, change, cooperation, and the highest standards of ethics, there are few effective and rewarding strategies on offer. Learning may be punished. Change attempts produce few real and meaningful outcomes. Competition reigns. And ethical behaviour seems to be mechanical and contractual as opposed to the embodiment of virtue. These challenges are complex, and demand sophisticated analysis. Causal Loop Diagramming is one method of coming to understand complex problems, especially when performed by teams. While the mapping process itself is beyond scope of this abridged article, Figure 1 presents a useful example.

WISDOM AS LIVING COMPLEXITY

The intent of this article is to promote a new way of thinking about work, and how and why things work as they do. Brodbeck (2002) and Shelton and Darling (2003) are amongst those who have observed that outmoded views impede organisational learning and change. These authors posit that the “new science” theories of complexity, chaos, emergence, and quantum mechanics can provide the foundation for a more contemporary and relevant way of thinking. The tried and true may no longer suffice; but a new day may be dawning. There has been a burgeoning interest in these “new science” theories amongst management and organisation scholars over the past two decades stimulated by influential scholars such as Gleick (1987), Stacey (1995), and Wheatley (1999), amongst others.

Every organisation can perform more effectively, ethically, and sustainably. Too often, however, our best efforts seem to go nowhere. Worse, they sometimes have unanticipated and undesirable effects (Argyris, 1986; Tucker, Edmondson, and Spear, 2001). The Wisdom Ecosystem model helps explain why. Parts of the model will surely resonate with many readers, helping to illuminate familiar phenomena that often go unexplained. Being able to work effectively within and upon complex
systems requires wisdom, which entails understanding of deep causality and consideration of consequences, long-term and far-reaching (Hays, 2007).

Collective Intelligence, Communal Mind, and the Ecology of Wisdom frames [organisational] wisdom as both possible and necessary, and explain how it arises (or is impeded). Within this ecological context, wisdom is understood to be the product of numerous factors (intelligence, knowledge, learning, experience, etc.) operating synergistically, with the result being greater than any of the individual constituents alone or additively (Gibson, 2008). Wisdom is, itself, a complex system.

Views on wisdom are vast and as varied as the sources conveying them, and there are many worthwhile articles and books on the subject. Hays (2007) puts much of this into an organisational perspective and provides good contextual background and a solid review of the literature. His 2007 paper was also apparently the first to present organisational wisdom as a complex system using a Causal Loop Diagram. Other relevant sources on wisdom with wider applicability to Collective Intelligence, Communal Mind, and the Ecology of Wisdom include: Bierly, Kessler, and Christensen (2000); Bonn (2005); Dey and Steyaert (2007); Miguel (2202); Nonaka and Toyama (2007); Rowsell and Berry (1993); Sternberg (1998; 2003); Stevens (2000); and Weymes (2004). Korak-Kakabadse, Korak-Kakabadse, and Kouzmin (2001) present a complementary treatise in their paper on wisdom and leadership renewal, addressing amongst other topics dialogue, trust, and empowerment, each included in the model put forward in this article.

Being able to work effectively within and upon complex systems requires more than intelligence, knowledge, and experience (Snell, 2001). These attributes are sufficient when encountering typical problems and conventional situations, but not in confronting the new and unexpected (Keating, Kauffmann, and Dryer, 2001). Known solutions to unknown problems are as likely to fail or exacerbate problems as they are to succeed. This is where wisdom comes in, and the greater the capacity for wisdom the better for all concerned.

Great wisdom capacity implies, amongst other things, widely dispersed or distributed wisdom and the capability to draw on and focus it. This is not the wisdom of the elite or that attributed to the occasional great leader, but the wisdom of the many (Surowieki, 2004). Communities of Practice (COPs) exemplify, at least potentially, collective wisdom and communal mind—where the group is smarter than the individuals comprising it. A COP recently convened to elaborate a plan to reinvigourate a corporate wellness program illustrates this. While each member had come prepared with a few ideas, Dialogue generated a whole new concept. Having multiple perspectives and voices allowed the group to develop a more encompassing and integrated program, and to consider a wider range of issues and impediments.
Diffused wisdom is substantively more and qualitatively different than, say, Collective Intelligence or Knowledge Management. It is not merely being smart or having wide access to information. It is a way of thinking and acting that more often than not will produce better decisions, strategies, and other outcomes.

Manifest organisational wisdom would, for instance, recognise that a problem is new and different, and that it might be unwise to respond conventionally to it as if it were a typical challenge. Lyles (1994) refers to this capacity as discrimination, skills that help the organisation “…to assess the differences among situations, in order to identify future actions” (p. 24). Scharmer (2001) identifies it as “self-transcending knowledge,” the ability to see and make use of new and emerging opportunities and situations before they fully come into being. Self-transcending knowledge or “precognition” comes about through generative dialogue, the fourth and highest level of thinking and interacting, according to Scharmer. As we will see, Dialogue plays a central role in the Wisdom Ecosystem.

The wise organisation would no more likely have a ready response or solution than its less wise counterparts. But it would have the capability to come to understand the problem system and, thus, to respond in a more reasoned way, all things considered. Wisdom is about recognising and overcoming the limits of knowledge and intelligence. Neither guarantees effectiveness. It is how you use them that matters. For this reason, practical wisdom is often prescribed (Fowers, 2003; Gibson, 2008; Nonaka and Toyama, 2007; Osbeck and Robinson, 2005; Roca, 2008). In practice, however, what appears to make sense at the time (or in the moment) is unwise when weighed against long-term consequences and considering the bigger picture. Sometimes the wisest immediate course of action is pause. As leaders, this may require courage and strength given the demands from constituents to “be decisive” and to “take charge” or stay in control.

Wisdom is also about learning, thus is less a measure of accumulated experience than it is about increased capacity to learn, including the necessity to unlearn (Akgün, et al., 2007; Bettis and Prahalad, 1995; Cegarra and Moya, 2005; Gharajedaghi, 2007; Prahalad and Bettis, 1986; Sinkula, 2002; Yeo, 2007). Sternberg (1998) is amongst those who assert that an important indicator of wisdom is the recognition of the limits of ones knowledge, fallibility, and approaches to problem-solving. Much is unknown and perhaps unknowable; adaptive systems are continually in a process of becoming—evolving and becoming more knowing (Pickering, 2004). Much of what we do know is in need of revision; much of our current knowledge and skill inhibit us from learning and progressing (Argyris, 1991; Prahalad and Bettis, 1986).

In the Community of Practice example above, with their “collective mind” group members were able to anticipate and counter problems arising from program implementation and sustainment. The program would have undoubtedly excluded certain stakeholder groups and conflicted with other initiatives if it had gone forward as originally planned.
Organisational systems work pretty much the way they are designed, whether we like the way they operate or not (Husted, 1993; Svyantek and DeShon, 1993; Weetman, 2009). Organisational systems can be mapped, and system behaviour, or dynamics, at least partly explained and predicted. The maps of complex systems are messy—tangled webs of components, the spaces surrounding them uncertain, and the mutual influences, or interdependence, amongst elements many, diverse, and obscure. Figure 1, the Wisdom Ecosystem, is such a map.

As human beings we possess the capability to fathom complex systems. Sadly we are driven to seek simplicity (Calton and Payne, 2003). It is much easier to understand and defend a relationship between two variables than to explain multiple elements in systems within systems. It is unfortunate that simple solutions for complex problems are fated to fail, as so many unsuccessful projects and initiatives bear out (Ahn, Adamson, and Dornbusch, 2004; Cooksey, 2003; Gill, 2007). Solutions that first come to mind or seem obvious are probably ill-conceived and have not considered the fullness of complex systems (Sice and French, 2006). This insidious process is, itself, an expression of problem dynamics embedded in a complex system. Prahalad and Bettis (1986) and Bettis and Prahalad (1995) have explored this at length in their work on dominant logic. Tucker, et al (2001) demonstrate the profound effects the system has on influencing problem-solving and, thus, learning and change. Embeddedness is an important systems principle: problems cannot be isolated from the systems in which they are located, or embedded; the system, itself, is nested within a larger context that must also be understood and, perhaps, changed, for viable problem resolution (Devine, 2005; Keating, et al, 2001). This explains why holistic approaches to problem analysis and intervention are more likely to succeed in complex environments than more formulaic ones (Clayton and Gregory, 2000; Sice and French, 2006), while also accepting that problem diagnosis or analysis is more challenging.

The balance that sustains life in an ecosystem can be delicate. What happens to one influences the other; what one does impacts the system and the individual elements within it (Fleckenstein, Spinuzzi, Rickly, and Papper, 2008). This highlights the lack of wisdom inherent in and unsustainable nature of self-serving acts and the thoughtless pursuit of ends with little regard to means or consequences. Wisdom can flourish in certain healthy environments, whereas under impoverished or offensive conditions it will wither and perish. If this article can promote a new ecological way of thinking in organisations and stimulate more deliberate care in cultivating conditions wherein wisdom can flourish then it will have served a valuable purpose.

SYSTEMS WISDOM

Organisations struggle to keep abreast of, understand, and practically employ ideas, tools, and techniques for getting the best out of their people and other resources they have available to them. Systems that promise to connect people, foster dialogue, and capitalise upon their distributed
intelligence and often tacit knowledge are seductive and earnestly worth the investment. *Collective Intelligence, Communal Mind, and the Ecology of Wisdom* presupposes that resident in the minds and hearts of people are the knowledge to solve many of the challenges that arise and the fervour to relentlessly pursue solutions and opportunities. Too often, however, this inherent brilliance remains an untapped, if vital potential. Many of us feel—and system providers and consultants would have us believe—that if we could only get people talking (about work-related matters), harness their collective intelligence, and leverage that passion that our organisations can survive problems that befall them. Our people, too, will thrive in the process as meaningful involvement can be a significant contributor to employee morale. Furthermore, engaging employees in the problems and opportunities organisations confront is the single best way to build internal capability (Kirk and Shutte, 2004).

Unfortunately, no Knowledge Management or Management Information System, yet available, is going to ensure people use it wisely or that their collective wisdom will be cultivated, captured, multiplied, or exploited (Hasan and Crawford, 2003; McDermott, 1999; Stapleton, et al, 2005). It is if and how people use the tools they have available that makes all the difference.

This article does not endeavour to cover and explain the various systems and tools for Collective Intelligence (CI) or Knowledge Management (KM). There are many useful sources readers may refer to in that regard, including: Ali (2001); Boder (2006); Bonabeau (2009); DiGiammarino and Trudeau (2008); Griffith and Sawyer (2006); Stapleton, et al (2005). The article does, however, explore some of the ideas, principles, and philosophy underlying CI. More importantly, it examines the system in which Collective Intelligence occurs. CI comprises an intact system; itself, subordinate, but integral to the larger Wisdom Ecosystem (at least potentially).

In the language of systems dynamics (Größler, 2004; Lane, 2000; Schwaninger, 2004), Collective Intelligence, Communal Mind, and Wisdom each comprises a system—in this case major subsystems of the Wisdom Ecosystem, or what may be referred to as a *complex adaptive system* (Bettis and Prahalad, 1995; Espinosa, Harnden, and Walker, 2007; Hall, 2005; Jankowicz, 2000; Stacey, 1995).

THE WISDOM ECOSYSTEM

Under the catch-all term systems thinking (Bonn, 2005; Clayton and Gregory, 2000; Maani and Maharaj (2004); Midgley, 2008; Minati, 2007; Montuori, 2000), the preceding sections introduced the ideas of systems dynamics and complex adaptive systems. The basic premise is that much behaviour and performance are systemic, and can really only be understood within the larger context or environment in which they occur. Systems thinking is a holistic approach to problem-solving

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2 See also Yolles (2005) who extends the notion of Collective Intelligence to *organisational intelligence*. 
Wisdom was conceived of as a complex adaptive ecosystem comprising Collective Intelligence, Communal Mind, the Ecology of Wisdom, and Dialogue. These four elements are critical subsystems. It is advantageous to think of them as working in concert, rather than as discrete systems or concepts. This idea of systems within systems is consistent with much of the literature on systems thinking and complexity, as elaborated by Clayton and Gregory (2000), Keating et al (2001), Stead and Stead (1994), and others, and on systemic organisational change (Bramson and Buss, 2002; Hornstein, 2008; Svyantek and DeShon, 1993).

**Dialogue**

As indicated in Figure 1, Dialogue serves as the hub or central linkage mechanism between and amongst Collective Intelligence, Communal Mind, and Wisdom. Ideally, Dialogue operates as a virtuous cycle. Hays (under review) examined the self-reinforcing nature of dialogue, reflection, and mindfulness. Dron (2007) explored the dynamics of dialogue and power, observing that as dialogue increases decentralised control could increase—or decentralisation can lead to greater dialogue. Conversely, as centralised control increases dialogue is likely to diminish; centralised control is more likely to be asserted in conditions of low dialogue. This is significant because of the inverse relationship between control and learning, adaptability, and innovation.

Dialogue implies an enhanced form of communication. While it may feel to the insider and appear to the outside observer as “just good conversation,” it is more than talk or even active listening. Dialogue hinges on skills, discipline, confidence, and trust. It doesn’t just happen. Even groups that appear to possess and demonstrate these attributes may break down when attempting Dialogue under challenging circumstances, such as might be the case with new membership, greater complexity of issues, conflicts, threats, or urgency. Thus, cultivation of Dialogue and attention to space, skills, process facilitation, and other enablers are warranted whenever performance levels are at a premium. For more information on Dialogue as it is used here, readers may refer to Atlee (2004); Calton and Payne (2003); Dron (2007); Kirk and Shute (2004); Korac-Kakabadse, et al (2001); Nonaka and Toyama (2007); Scharmer (2001); Simatupang and White (1998); Snell (2001); and van Eijnatten (2004). Cooren (2004) doesn’t use the term, but his brilliant article on communication and “collective minding” is all about dialogue. Finally, there is always the Isaacs (1999) classic *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together.*
Collective Intelligence

Collective Intelligence is the effort to get the most out of what people know and do. It is meant to integrate, synthesise, and leverage distributed knowledge, skill, and talent. Collective Intelligence systems, then, are concerned with connecting people, providing access to “intelligence” and ideas, and equipping people with tools to convert intelligence into tangible products and practical services as quickly and easily as possible.

Collective Intelligence is resident within the heads and hearts of members of work groups and communities. It often resides as a potential, and this is what the machinery attempts to surface and exploit; but is there in any group where individual experience and knowledge have accumulated. Unfortunately, few groups and individuals within groups are aware of their own vast collective potential or know how to best tap it. This oversight extends to organisations as well (Ringer, 2007).

Too often, cleverness and creativity are thought to be traits possessed by individuals (and, then, in short supply). And, while it is true that there are exceptional individuals, this article is concerned with the collective potential of groups and organisations.

Drawing on and leveraging distributed potential is the intent of the Collective Intelligence subsystem, but in no way can be achieved exclusively by it. This observation partly explains what gave rise to the notion of Communal Mind (see below) and how it operates synergistically with Collective Intelligence; in turn, producing something greater than either of these two subsystems independently or combined. Collective Intelligence may be linked to organisational learning and could be conceived of as the output of the learning organisation, or at least part of what the LO attempts to do. As we will see, however, CI is more of an input to learning than learning itself. Learning occurs through the interoperation of Collective Intelligence, Communal Mind, Dialogue, and the Wisdom Ecology.

Communal Mind

Communal Mind is a new idea in the management and organisation literature, though it can be linked to more familiar concepts such as organisational culture. CM plays a vital role in the Wisdom

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3 There exists a rich heritage of literature on organisational learning and learning organisations. Select sources of particular relevance to this article include: Bell, Whitwell, and Lukas (2002); Easterby-Smith, Snell, and Gherardi (1998); Hall (2005); Jankowicz (2000); Shelton and Darling (2003); and Yeo (2002; 2007).

4 Due justice to organisational culture cannot, here, be served, as the field is large and interesting. One might wonder where culture is in the Wisdom Ecosystem—it seems like an obvious candidate. It does not appear as an individual variable, but is ubiquitous. On the whole, the dynamic model presented embodies organisational culture. That culture is wisdom—how it is manifested and encouraged; the values, processes, systems, behaviours, and thought patterns of wisdom. Readers may refer to any of the following sources, selected for their wider relevance to this article, for further detail on organisational culture: Ahn, et al (2004); Brunetto (2001); Den Hartog and Verburg (2004); Fard, Rostamy, and Taghiloo (2009); Lok and Crawford (2004); Martins and Terblanche (2003); Mauull, Brown, and Cliffle (2001); and Wallace, Hunt, and Richards (1999).
Ecosystem. It is the “flip side” of Collective Intelligence, serving a very important balancing or mediating function.

Communal Mind has been understood as or is similar to organisational mind or consciousness (van Eijnatten, 2004; Weick and Roberts, 1993), collective consciousness (Hoogerwerf and Portius, 2002; Raelin, 2006; Smith and Graetz, 2006), collective mind (Brockman and Anthony, 1998; Cooren, 2004; de Leede, Nijhof, and Fisscher, 1999; Dron, 2007; Weick and Roberts, 1993), and group mind or consciousness (Weick and Roberts, 1993; Gustavsson, 2001). Somewhat related is the theory of organisational cognition (Bonn, 2005).

The critical notion of Communal Mind is that intelligence is a fundamental part of the system and its interactions, not a character of the individual minds comprising it. This is the thrust of much work on collective intelligence and performance (Cooren, 2004; van Eijnatten, 2004; Weick and Roberts, 1993). The “group mind generates its own distinct dynamic through the collective activities of its individual participants” (Dron, 2007; p. 214).

As used here, Communal Mind implies:

1. A shared acceptance of a given group that it is a community (however temporary)—there is a sense of “us” (van Eijnatten, 2004) or “we-ness” (Fayard and DeSanctis, 2009). It has and demonstrates commonality of purpose, values, language, and other understandings such as norms, roles, and practices. There is a commitment to the welfare and continuation of the group and its reason for being. These are the “collective interests” (Husted, 1993), the “community” in Communal Mind (Hays, 2009).

2. A shared way of thinking that includes the way the world is perceived and the group’s place within it. Members would understand things similarly, for example, what works and what doesn’t; what causes a particular problem and what might resolve it. Such shared thinking can be problematic, as highlighted by the literature: (Argyris, 1991; Bernthal and Insko, 1993; Kim, 2001; Prahalad and Bettis, 1986). While challenges cannot be denied, value of concerted thought and action is likewise critical. This is the shared or collective mind in Communal Mind. It can be the galvanising and unifying force needed to mobilise a group into committed action and focus its efforts (de Leede, et al, 1999; Ringer, 2007).

3. An active and encompassing awareness or consciousness of the collective, what might be called collective mindfulness or heedfulness (de Leede, et al, 1999; Weick and Roberts, 1993). This is not

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5 Dron (2007) humorously includes reference to Star Trek’s Borg, a collective race sharing one consciousness.
just about manifest behaviour (e.g., how the group solves a problem or carries out a task), but also how the group is thinking, how mindful the group is concerning its thought processes and member effectiveness as they go about their tasks. This is collective knowing (Korsvold and Ramstad, 2004), not knowledge. Gustavsson (2001) presents an insightful interpretation and application of individual and group consciousness in his article on transcendent epistemology and organisational change. This may be called collective meta-cognition (Blatner, 2004; Boström and Lassen, 2006; Brown and Ryan (2004; Hays, under review)—thinking about thinking; bringing to the surface (making conscious) habits of mind and practice that often remain unwitting and, thus, unconsciously impede constructive group dynamics and undermine problem solving, innovation, and learning.

Communal Mind plays an important role in the Wisdom Ecosystem, translating, interpreting, adopting, contextualising, and applying the “intelligence” enabled by Collective Intelligence. It is the human side of CI—what makes it collective, or better, communal. The work here begins to address Husted’s (1993) call: “There is an urgent need [to take] a more expansive, natural systems view which takes into account the cultural and behavioural side of organizations” (p. 768). This notion of “natural systems” (McElroy, 2000; Svyantek and DeShon, 1993; Yoon and Kuchinke, 2005) is quite useful, and accords with the ecological view of organisational systems and dynamics (Hall, 2005; Kunsch, Theys, and Brans, 2007; Ruth, 2006) as well as the importance of ecological considerations in organisational problem-solving and decision-making (Clayton and Gregory, 2000; Devine, 2005).

Wisdom

Drawing on at least a decade of study, contemplation, and group work, the author has synthesised principles concerning wisdom, including those codified for this article (see Table 1). These principles should be considered as a whole. They are not individual prescriptions, but work in concert to promote wiser thinking and acting. They should not be taken as given by organisations, but comprise a platform for Dialogue between and amongst staff and other stakeholders. They can and should be interpreted, validated, and revised. This work dovetails with the author’s research in learning, performance, teamwork and collaboration, and Communities of Practice. It seems the notions of wisdom and group learning and performance were destined to intertwine. The main point to remember, here, is that we are concerned with collective wisdom, not individual. We are interested in the way teams, groups, communities, and organisations and institutions engender, elicit, and exploit wisdom.

Intelligence is necessary, but insufficient in enabling creativity and innovation, complex problem-solving, or responsible decision-making. Wisdom is what allows individuals, groups, organisations, and even societies to solve the most challenging problems in ways that serve the greater good.
Wisdom resides as a potential within us all, but that wisdom often and unfortunately remains latent. There are many reasons for this. As we begin to understand and remove the impediments to wisdom, we will begin to see individuals and organisations expressing greater concern for others and our planet—that is, acting more wisely in and on the world.

As with intelligence, wisdom is often thought to be something with which only extraordinary individuals are endowed. However, if we can accept that intelligence is something that can be collective, then it stands to reason that wisdom can as well. This is not to say that wisdom is always apparent in those around us or widely recognised as a pervasive individual quality, much less an attribute of groups, organisations, or societies. That wisdom is seldom observed is not, itself, an indictment. We may simply fail to recognise it in ourselves and others. This comes as no surprise given the fact that the wise are held to be few and far between, and the exemplars are often “bigger than life.” At the same time, wisdom may be impeded or suppressed by the systems in which we live and work. We would like to think that wisdom transcends the motivations and constraints of our surroundings, but this is not always so. This is why understanding system or organisational dynamics is so important. We may need to liberate and nourish wisdom.\(^6\)

Wisdom is not cleverness. The sly fox is cunning, but not wise. A clever financier might borrow from Peter to pay Paul, but a wise individual would confront the debt problem more honestly and with more foresight. Our organisations, institutions, and nations may be led by clever individuals and teams, politically astute and comfortable wielding power, but escapades, debacles, and corruption, crimes, and other misdeeds provide strong evidence that our leaders do not always act wisely. Dubious ethics, self-serving values and mores, ambiguous laws, and inconsistent enforcement go part way in accounting for transgressions and indiscretions, but do not explain what drives us to do the right thing. The answer lies within the system.

Many threats and challenges are within the realm of solution. Systems thinking helps us understand the complexity of problems and opportunities, and informs us where to intercede with the greatest probability of success. Systems thinking and tools such as Causal Loop Diagramming can elicit wisdom, and if used wisely can promote elegant, ethical, and sustainable solutions to seemingly intractable problems. The Wisdom Ecosystem CLD (Figure 1) may not completely explain organisational wisdom and its dynamics, but it substantially contributes to a more enlightened understanding of that phenomena.

\(^6\) Weetman (2009) reminds us that Collective Intelligence may serve the interests of the “system” reinforcing the status quo instead of leading to significant learning and change. This inherent and disturbing possibility suggests an important distinction between intelligence and wisdom. The intelligent system may be self-serving. The wise one is not.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article proposes an ecological model of wisdom: the Wisdom Ecosystem. That model represents a complex adaptive system. By definition, a complex adaptive system interacts with its environment in a co-existence of mutual influence or a symbiotic relationship (Espinosa, et al, 2007; Hall, 2005; Jankowicz, 2000; Pickering, 2004; Stacey, 1995). A complex adaptive system will survive to the degree that it adapts to its environment—it evolves (Montuori, 2000). It is not only responsive and resilient, however, but also shapes its environment (if only imperceptibly).

The notion of the organisation as a complex adaptive system is not new, though the idea of the organisation as a conscious organism acting wisely in and on the world is only just beginning to take hold. The view of the organisation as rational, mechanical, and particularistic has serious limitations, especially in an unpredictable and unstable environment. This has been persuasively argued by (Catton and Dunlap, 1980; Shelton and Darling, 2003; Yoon and Kuchinke, 2005). No matter how well engineered, the precision organisation fails in fluid, dynamic circumstances. An exception to this is when procedures aren’t followed to the letter; that is when people behave spontaneously or capriciously. This behaviour at “the edge of chaos” is thought to be what enables a complex adaptive system to adapt, evolve, and learn.

The term ecosystem was incorporated because it invokes the notion of a diverse, thriving community whose members are mutually interdependent, concerned with continuity and welfare, and interacting continually with the environment. It can be instructive to conceive of a group or an organisation as an ecosystem—holistically and symbiotically. One need only look at the consequences of one species disappearing or one variable such as temperature shifting perceptibly on the rest of its ecosystem to appreciate the vital significance of each element in the Wisdom Ecosystem. An inherently wise system is one that is both resilient and does minimal harm to the environment. A truly wise organisation will be the one that contributes positively to the world while sustaining itself.

The notion of organisations as living systems or as ecologies has been increasing, as a spate of scientific papers reviewed for this article attests (Bonn, 2005; Catton and Dunlap, 1980; Devine, 2005; Fleckenstein, et al, 2008; Hall, 2005; Hearn and Pace, 2006; Johnson and Macy, 2001; Kunsch, et al, 2007; Ruth, 2006; Yanitsky, 2007). These new ways of conceiving of and studying organisations have profound implications for research and practice, not least of which include the way we structure...
organisations and approach change. Correlation or causality, consciousness of systems thinking, chaos, and emergence is increasing at the same time that organisations are flattening, decentralising, and empowering. Both express the need for resilience, re-ordering, and adaptation; to learn, respond, evolve, and anticipate changes in the environment.

Collective Intelligence fulfils an important, but limited role in organisational learning and change. However, working in concert with other crucial subsystems it can deliver on its promises. The other major parts of the Wisdom Ecosystem include Dialogue, Communal Mind, and Wisdom, each with its own interesting internal dynamics and working interdependently with the rest of system. Each subsystem needs to be understood and effectively put into place for the overall system to begin to think and act wisely.

The underlying premise of this article is that systemic understanding is an essential component of wisdom and, other things equal, contributes to acting wisely. Nonetheless, systems thinking is and of itself does not necessarily produce wisdom or wise acts. A systemic thinker could be clever and still act unwisely. Amongst the ingredients of wisdom are virtues such as conscience, compassion, and courage. While these and other virtues are often thought to be individual traits, they can fundamentally define an organisation. A socially responsible organisation, for example, reduces its carbon footprint or supports community enrichment. Collective, communal virtues are embedded in the Wisdom Ecosystem. They are made conscious, shaped, and reinforced through the interaction of the elements of the ecosystem, largely through Dialogue (see Item 1, Figure 1).

In sum, Collective Intelligence is not something you give to people, as in software or hardware to communicate, collaborate, or gather intelligence. It is not a set of instructions or a compilation of knowledge or best practice. Learning and becoming wise are a process. Becoming “collectively intelligent” and using Collective Intelligence wisely are also a process. As such, you can provide pathways for people, maybe even put them on the right path, and you can outfit them for their journey and provide supports along the way, but they have to follow the course that works for them. They have to “find their own way.”

A lot of people are uncomfortable with this notion that people have to find their own way. On the leadership side, public and private (including parents and teachers), we feel that we must provide the way. On the employee side, including learners of all ilk and the public at large, we demand structure and direction. The complex dynamics (that sometimes seem contradictory) surrounding this phenomenon are beyond scope of this discussion, but a fundamental crux includes trust and faith. There is often too little (in either direction) for the wisdom path to be offered or taken. Where trust is in doubt there will be little flourishing; and wisdom – collective or individual – will be subverted. The challenge, then, becomes, how do we create and sustain that nourishing ecosystem?
REFERENCES


Hays, J. (under review). The team learning pyramid: dialogue, reflection, and mindfulness.


Additional Reading


Figure 1. The Wisdom Ecosystem. Causal Loop (Influence) Diagram depicting the four subsystems, Dialogue, Collective Intelligence, Communal Mind, and Wisdom.
Wisdom Principles

Collective intelligence is the product of effective communications. It is the power of the collective, and a measure of the effectiveness of the communications and interactions amongst the collective.

The “communal mind” represents shared thinking, the metaphorical united brain or CPU of all concerned (employees, stakeholders, team). It does not mean one view, but the gathering and equal consideration of the views of all using the power of the collective to distil the many and diverse views into one or more conclusion, decision, or course of action.

Collective intelligence is evidenced by the variety of ideas generated and/or entertained by a group and the way those ideas are capitalised upon to produce tangible products and services.

Collective intelligence and the communal mind do not depend on and, in fact, may be undermined by directive leaders (as in the executive brain that tells the body what to do). They are not controlled, but allowed. Employees and stakeholders are seen as different but equal brains all internetworked—the collective or communal neural system.

Every communication and interaction can be enhanced, that is, become more effective, meaningful, or fulfilling.

Every communication or interaction can and should stimulate positive learning and growth of all involved. If everyone commits to their own learning and to that of others, there will be fewer power contests and unhealthy competitions, and fewer communications and interactions directive or advocative in nature and more showing empathy, compassion, and care.

Wisdom cannot be taught, but it can be learned and developed. Wisdom can be inspired or otherwise catalysed. Conditions can be created such that wisdom is more likely to ensue.

People resist or dismiss what they’re told; they embrace what they discover.

People need latitude to explore and experiment; if they are given too little room to manoeuvre they will not learn and develop.

People expect, even demand direction and structure; however providing them is counterproductive. The more people are told what to do, the more they become dependent, passive, or compliant and fail to develop crucial skills, habits, and attitudes of self-direction.

Many of the problems we see in communication, interaction, and initiative are a result of lack of trust, in one or both directions. The single most important task in organisations concerned with viability is the cultivation of trust.

Power and authority [differences] will always exist; their unproductive consequences must be understood and minimised for collaboration to be its most successful.

Effective collaboration hinges on finding a balance between diversity and consensus.

Effective leaders facilitate and promote conversations and collaboration; they create environments wherein effective Dialogue and collaboration are possible and sought-after. They do not necessarily lead directly (as in telling or selling), but support.

Dialogue is inherently empowering and equalising. The greater the shared skills in Dialogue, the more voices are heard and the greater the Dialogue; the greater the Dialogue, the greater the shared and potential power of those in Dialogue. The greater the shared power and potential of those involved, the more likely effective strategies can be put in place and positive change will be achieved.

Dialogue is about cultivating capability, individual and group, and developing community (where community is a group of people united by shared understanding and common purpose and aspirations).

Wisdom is about choices, informed choices along with a weighing of pros and cons, making the best choice all things considered. Such choices can be quite difficult and may involve dilemmas. Wisdom does not make answers easier, though likely better.

Table 1. Wisdom principles related to the Wisdom Ecosystem.