

The Collective Wisdom Project

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- **Great leaders focus on the right things at the right time.**
- **You can argue. Have a power play. Break apart.**
- **You can honor each other's opinion. Be respectful. Agree to disagree. Keep exploring possible alternatives.**
- **Only a fool thinks he knows everything.**
- **Considers the greatest good of the most people.**
- **Creates better thinking and better decisions.**

Ways of gaining wisdom:

- 1. Science**
- 2. Belief**
- 3. Guiding Principles, Guidelines**
- 4. Logic**
- 5. Learning from past experiences, reflection, evaluation, distillation of lessons learned**
- 6. Historic analysis**
- 7. Acquiring knowledge, reading wise books, articles, quotes**
- 8. Listening to others, storytelling, oral history**
- 9. Parables, aphorisms, sayings, idioms, gems of wisdom**
- 10. Quieting the mind and listening to inner-wisdom**
- 11. Learning from observation of people and the rest of nature**

Co-stupidity

<http://www.co-intelligence.org/co-stupidity.html>

"Co-stupidity" describes the collective inability of groups, communities, organizations and societies to see what's happening in and around them, and to deal effectively with what they find. It is the opposite of collective intelligence.

It is important to understand... a group or society is behaving co-stupidly or co-intelligently... [however to say that] says nothing about the intelligence of the individuals involved.

Some of the most co-stupid groups are made up of brilliant people who use their brilliance to undermine each other so that together they add up to nothing. Or they may be trapped in a dysfunctional group process or social system that erodes or wastes their brilliance. Worse yet, a social system can transmute individual brilliance into collective catastrophe, perhaps by using it to create devastating weapons of mass destruction or technologies that predictably run amok or investment strategies that collapse entire regional economies.

Co-stupidity can also arise from group or international dynamics. Co-stupidity can arise from both competition and conformity. A clear example of competitive co-stupidity at the global scale was the US/USSR deterrence strategy called "Mutually Assured Destruction" (MAD), in which an arms race of ever-more-powerful weapons sufficient to destroy the world were kept at hair-trigger alert to prevent the other side from launching their own weapons.

In contrast, cooperative, conformist groupthink happens when the people in a group keep their views to themselves because they don't want to be different or rejected. Each person in the group goes along with a leader or with what they think the group wants, without challenging ideas that don't quite make sense to them or offering creative alternatives.

Furthermore, co-stupidity can arise from neither competition nor conformity but simply from poorly designed systems and feedback loops that reward people for doing -- or punish them for not doing -- actions that are destructive over the long term or endanger the life around them. When millions of people do actions like that -- such as driving internal combustion vehicles, pumping toxics into the environment or letting TV replace community and citizenship -- the systems they are part of can end up doing a lot of damage. These acts of collective self-destruction, seen from the outside, may seem quite stupid, suggesting that co-stupidity is at work.

In contrast to all this, it turns out that people of very ordinary or even low intelligence can, if they collaborate creatively within a well-designed system or good group process, generate a level of collective brilliance that far exceeds what they could do under the control of a brilliant leader.

Once we are in a group or society, our collective intelligence or stupidity has little to do with how clever or slow we are individually -- and everything to do with how well our system is designed, how good our process is, how wisely we handle information, and how well we all work together, how open we are to diversity, challenge and novelty.

A closer look at societal co-stupidity

Societal Intelligence

Part of co-intelligence is collective intelligence. **The collective intelligence of whole societies is called societal intelligence.**

Societal intelligence involves, among other things,

- **accessible information flows and feedback loops** so that relevant information is broadly available
- **forums for effective dialogue** where the meaning of such information can be explored
- **the active involvement of citizens** in these information flows and dialogues, and the **ability of those citizens' perspectives to adapt as fuller understandings emerge.**

The more all three of these factors are present, the more useful diverse perspectives will be to the **collective mind**, and the less likely the whole culture will find itself stuck at one extreme or another (unable to respond) or torn apart from within by the expansion of extremism in a contracting middle ground.

In many social and environmental problems the discourse is often extreme. Intense discussions occur in widely diverse specialized groups. Some may fear a catastrophe while others brush the problem off. **There is precious little creative middle ground or dialogic space in which the merits of various perspectives can be**

compared and understood in nuanced ways, and more useful perspectives evolved.

This suggests a need for greater societal intelligence. To help us understand how to pursue that objective, we can look at the sort of factors that undermine the three primary conditions for societal intelligence mentioned above. Among the more obvious are:

- lack of citizen involvement in public discourse and societal learning (whether from distraction, disillusionment, confusion, or otherwise)
- individual and collective denial (motivated by fear, habit, ignorance, or otherwise)
- the suppression of information that threatens special interests (by corporations, media, politicians, lawyers, etc.)
- a level of specialization that makes it difficult to know the significance of data from outside one's sphere and virtually impossible to understand how diverse pieces of the picture fit together
- dysfunctional forms of public discourse that fail to generate public wisdom and will
- fashion-driven information distribution (e.g., sexy news), lacking context and follow-up
- competitive or conformist political cultures that keep public opinion from adapting to changing circumstances.

These add up to the cultural co-stupidity we find when we observe how whole societies respond to their pressing collective problems.

Anything we can do to ameliorate the obstacles to societal intelligence listed above, will increase our culture's capacity to respond to its growing crises and all the dangers and opportunities of the 21st century.

Collaborative Intelligence

Another part of co-intelligence is collaborative intelligence, the capacity to work with the world around us, not trying to dominate it.

A large part of our social and environmental problems arise from our effort to get what we want from the world without taking into account its needs or its wisdom. This leaves our economic and technological systems overextended and vulnerable. Natural systems are resilient because their complexity has been evolving for billions of years. Our culture is arrogant enough to think that it can create highly complex systems from scratch and get away with it. We lack the patience to learn from nature how to collaborate with it to grow what we need. We only have the capacity to force nature to tell us enough of its secrets to take what we want.

This difference is visible in the distinction between indigenous science and modern science. Indigenous science -- the science practiced by native peoples -- learns the dynamics and spirit of nature in a particular place, so that the learner can develop a right relationship, a respectful partnership with the natural entities in his or her environs. Modern science, in contrast, attempts to find universal causal principles that will allow technicians to

manipulate physical reality to construct and extract without having to give much, if anything, back; without having to belong or owe or love. Take the money and run.

Our technologies have been used mostly to increase our capacity to take the money and run, to efficiently extract and move what we want from point A to point B, faster and farther, with less expense, effort or obligation. The interconnectedness this has woven into our culture has added to our ability to extract life from each other, from communities, from the highly-evolved and productive natural systems around us. We suck out life, and leave deadness behind. Look at the hills that are mined or clearcut. Look at the boarded-up towns. Look at the faces on the trains and in the cars, the endless cars and trucks laying their tracks of stone over everything, driving weather to extremes. This is a web of death, as brittle as a dead branch, ready to snap. It doesn't matter how fast the pieces move, how vast the masses/statistics/cities, how bright the colored plastic. It is not alive and it is forced. It will not last.

Permaculture offers one view out. Permaculture has the solidity of modern science yet the sensitivity of indigenous science. Permaculture has principles, universal ecological design principles. And once you learn them, you throw them away far enough that you can then look at the life that is all around you and really see it -- see what it does, what it needs, what it has to offer, what kind of dance it is inviting you into. Permaculture teaches us -- those of us who have forgotten -- how to work with nature, to become a partner to Life, so that plants and animals and dirt and water and weather yield us food and clothing and shelter and meaning freely and vibrantly without having to be hacked, yanked, forced and poisoned. Permaculture systems are resilient, because

they use the natural tendencies of things to do what they naturally do, all arranged so that they are all useful to and supportive of each other. You don't have to poison the slugs; the ducks will eat them. The ducks will swim in the pond you made by digging out earth with which to build your aesthetic, well insulated home, whose greywater flows through a marsh you built -- complete with lovely cattails -- to purify it before it arrives in the pond where the ducks swim above the goldfish.

I saw this very thing a few years ago, on my first visit to an actual permaculture site near Point Reyes, California. It had a profound impact on me. It was more Eden than farm, more work of art than constructed development. It was not planned and built. It had grown and evolved for several years, with the equal participation of the land, plants, animals, and humans. The humans brought to the dance their conscious observation, thinking and caring. Next year that site won't be the same, because it will have led to something else, equally beautiful and productive, ever new.

People like I met there don't generate social and environmental problems. They don't create global warming, racism and toxic waste dumps. Their spirit is collaborative, patient, spiritual, eager to give as much as to take, happy to belong and co-create, loving the wisdom that grows so deeply all around them and curious to see what it will do next.

If we can learn this gigantic lesson, then our grandchildren will know what life is all about. And they will carry it on, they will belong to the Earth again and to each other. We will have made it, as a culture. And perhaps we won't do this again, this waste of life and meaning.

To the person with a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.

To the person with a song, a drum and a dream, every problem looks like a dance.