
Kluwer Mediation Blog

Many brains make smart work

Charlie Woods (Core Solutions Group / Scottish Universities Insight Institute) · Wednesday, February 8th, 2023

Neuroscientist Hannah Critchlow's latest [book](#) 'Joined-up Thinking – The science of collective intelligence' makes the case that the range and complexity of the challenges that face us as a species require an even greater focus on working together to harness our intelligence in its broadest sense.

She argues that even though our success as a species has been largely down to our ability to cooperate we have become too focussed on the importance of individual intelligence and as a result: *"We get stuck in our own little bubbles, overlooking ideas and people that could disrupt our thinking in useful ways. We don't talk or listen with enough curiosity and patience to actually learn. We pay lip service to the value of collaboration without knowing how to really do effective joined up thinking, or what it might mean for us if we did."*

Collective endeavour began in family groups but soon spread to encompass more and more people in larger groups and organisations. In his recently published economic [history](#) of the long twentieth century (1870-2010) 'Slouching towards Utopia', Brad de Long highlights the role of the modern corporation and industrial research labs (alongside globalisation) as key factors in the development of modern economies, which allowed humanity to break out of the Malthusian trap where any improvements in output were overwhelmed by a growing population. The role they played was very much as vehicles for collaboration both in generating innovation and disseminating it widely.

The role of the such organisations in influencing world events is also highlighted in William Magnuson's [history](#) of corporations 'For Profit'. He argues that since Roman times corporations have been: *'public entities with a public purpose, given special rights and privileges....While they sometimes – perhaps even often – stray from this purpose their original and abiding justification has always been their ability to promote the good of all.'*

Returning corporations to this original purpose may be one of the major challenges we face given their influence on environmental and societal wellbeing and their potential as engines of cooperation to be a force for good.

In many respects corporations are an embodiment of the collective intelligence that Critchlow explores, particularly as intangibles such as knowledge are increasingly at the heart of what generates economic value. She looks at what neuroscience has learned in recent years about how the brain-body system operates as a whole and how minds influence each other. For example how electrical oscillations between individual's brains synchronise when they are engaged in communal activity and how this can be disrupted by stress, fear and conflict. Amongst other things she

highlights the need to be as inclusive as possible in engaging ‘unusual suspects’ to bring different perspectives to bear on the challenges we face.

Mathematician David Orrell certainly brings a fresh, outsiders perspective to thinking about economics. In his book ‘Money, magic, and how to dismantle a financial bomb’ he argues that rather than using traditional neoclassical models – with their stable equilibria, independent, objective, rational, utility maximising economic agents etc. – a quantum approach might offer more helpful insights for a complex, dynamic system such as the modern economy, where subjective feelings have a strong influence on decision making, where people are inextricably entangled with others in many different ways and where cause and effect are hard to unravel. He is particularly interested in the role played by money in this weave, seeing it as a much more active part of economic systems than merely the passive facilitator of transactions.

The world we are living in certainly feels increasingly messy, volatile and confused at the moment and would appear to be crying out for more cooperation and less polarisation to help make sense of what’s going on and do something about it.

Perhaps not surprisingly to mediators Critchlow highlights listening as the key skill required for effective collaborative working. Indeed mediation skills and processes have the potential to offer much in encouraging greater collaboration for the common good. Highlights might include:

- Thorough preparation to consider underlying interests and objectives of all involved and developing an open mind to multiple possibilities
- Rapport building to provide a foundation for helping diverse groups work together based upon respect
- Digging deep to understand different perspectives and points of view to increase the resources at our disposal
- Encouraging creativity in generating ideas and options for moving forward built on this understanding
- Careful evaluation of possible ways forward to ensure interests are aligned as much as possible and that solutions are fair and perceived to be fair
- Flexible decision making building on synergies and weighing up trade offs
- Following through on the implementation of agreed solutions
- Evaluating both outcomes and the processes used to reach these outcomes to learn for the future

In times gone by when work was more physical the proverb ‘many hands make light work’ made a lot of sense, perhaps we should now be focusing more on effectively engaging ‘many brains’.

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