

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION

ACTING COLLECTIVELY INTELLIGENT UNDER PRESSURE

FOUR KEY CAPABILITIES THAT TEAMS NEED
TO TRULY COLLABORATE DURING A CRISIS



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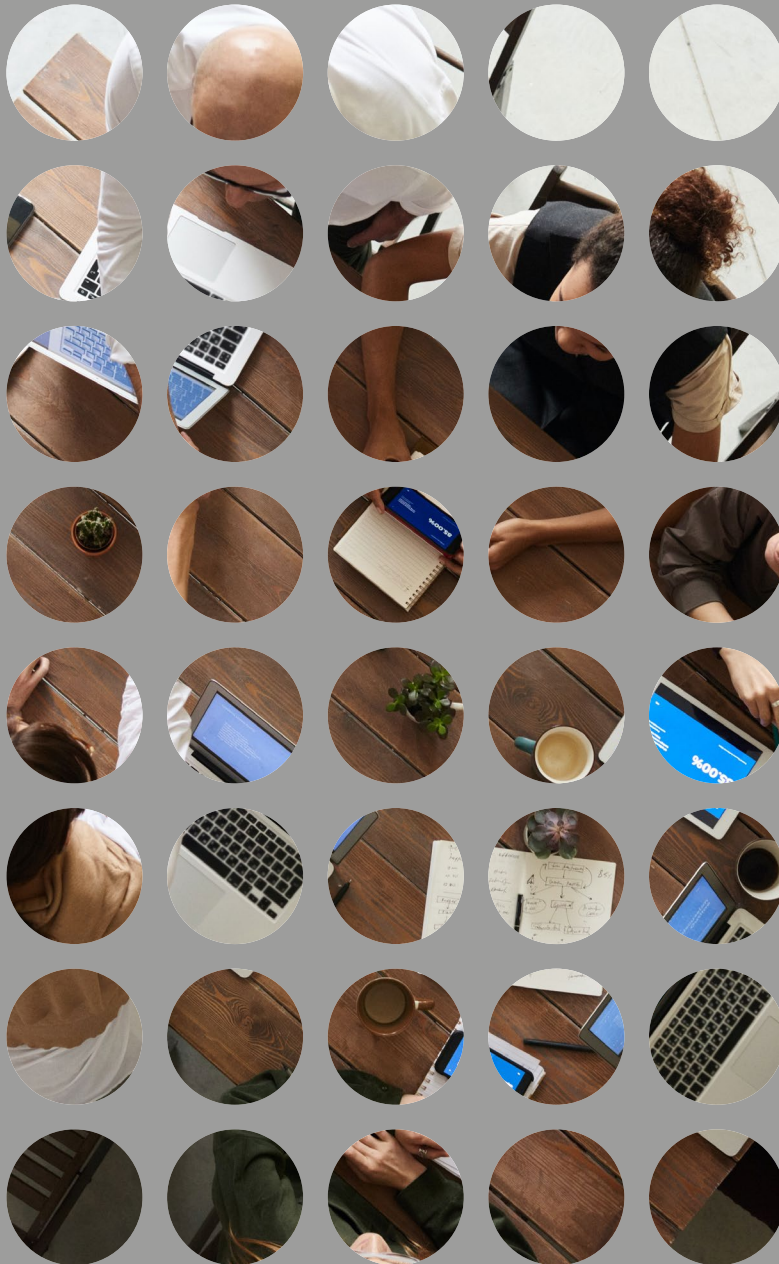


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In May 2020, over 2 months into the acute COVID-19 crisis, we surveyed a sample of managers about what the crisis had meant to them. ¹ Close to 80% stated that they and their work-groups had been confronted with entirely new kinds of challenges and 70% saw that dealing with these challenges required new kinds of collaborations. A crisis may bring out the best – and worst – in teams. While the successful response to a crisis demands collaboration, and the consideration of a problem from multiple perspectives (i.e. acting collectively intelligent), cognitive as well as social mechanisms pose barriers to a team’s ability to exploit its multiple perspectives. What can leaders and managers do to overcome these barriers to knowledge integration and contribute to higher levels of collective intelligence?

The difficulties of being intelligent together under pressure

Crises confront organizations with new and often acute problems that require intelligent and timely responses. Leaders are expected to manage emergencies rapidly and effectively and crisis leadership is often thought of in terms of authoritarian action by a forceful leader. However, the actual handling of a crisis and its consequences is more often a collaborative effort that is hard to coordinate top-down because both information and expertise is distributed among individuals (1). Consider the following example:

In the wake of a previous crisis – the 2000 dot-com bubble crash – one of this article’s co-authors was part of a management team desperately struggling to save an IT consultancy hit hard by the sudden collapse of the market. In trying to get the organization back on track, the management team, consisting of experienced and highly competent individuals, had taken all the usual measures, including reorganizations, increasing accountability, tightening the control system and changing the incentive system, but all which had very limited effects. The meetings of the management team had become increasingly frustrating events as the crisis persisted. The discussions became more and more predictable, with the different members sticking to their preferred theories. Mo-

reover, to the extent decisions were made, actions were half-heartedly implemented, increasing the distrust and frustration in the team. “It felt like you knew beforehand exactly how the meeting would go, who would say what, who would argue against... It felt like we were stuck”, one of the former managers remembers. In a final desperate effort to remedy this deadlock, the management team hired a pair of team coaches that took them on a three-day retreat where they were to work on their collaboration skills. After 72 hours on an island in the Stockholm archipelago a different management team stepped ashore. With newfound enthusiasm and trust in each other, a different set of measures could be imagined. The implementation of decisions became more wholehearted and eventually the organization was turned around and became one of the fastest growing IT firms post crisis. “I was amazed! For the first time in my life, someone taught me to think of cooperation as a skill; something I needed to practice and develop. If I’m good at it, I can work with many different personalities, in many different situations. If I’m not so good, I’m dependent on the conditions to be in my favor, which of course is risky. If you want a good team you have to work on it instead of just trusting in luck” the former manager summarized.

This story illustrates both the challenges and opportunities of being collectively intelligent as a team. While the complementing experiences and competencies of the team members were a great potential, and even though all those involved wanted and were dependent on success, realizing this potential was still challenging. Research has pointed at both psychological and social mechanisms that may explain this.

First, the seminal research by Nobel laureate Herbert Simon (2) has shown that individuals are boundedly rational in their decision making. Individuals have different problem definitions and based on them, they strive for “good enough” rather than optimal solutions to problems. In order to rationalize the use of their limited cognitive resources, they rely on heuristics and rules of thumb in their decision making. Especially under pressure, individuals have been shown to revert to their trained and “normal” response patterns, explaining why management team

members, in the example described above, stuck to their perspectives and were so reluctant to open up to new and different perspectives and solutions to a problem. In a seminal study, Karl Weick (3) showed that fire fighters whose entire problem-solving arsenal was closely related to the tools they carried, refused to drop these tools in order to escape an out of control fire even though this led to their death. To summarize, the more pressure, the greater the risk that team members get stuck in their individual problem definition, and their bounded rationality, making them incapable of merging their perspectives.

Second, what Deborah Dougherty (4) calls interpretive barriers may hinder intelligent collective action. Different professions, functions and occupations exist in different thought worlds in which reality, including problems and their solutions, take different shapes. The world of the marketing manager is a different one than that of the financial manager. They see different problems and thus also different kinds of solutions, especially in times of crisis. While this multiplicity of perspectives is an important condition for successfully addressing major issues such as a crisis, this will require attention to both financial and market issues. This twofold recognition is not easily realized as these different understandings of the world challenge communication and joint problem solving.

Thirdly, these obstacles that hinder drawing benefits from diverse perspectives are further enforced by the social barrier of defensive behaviors and skilled incompetence described by Donald Schön and Chris Argyris (5,6). As social beings, we are highly skilled in maintaining “good” relationships with others. However, at times, this endeavor for pleasant communication may hinder us from really getting to the roots of an issue. In the interest of keeping good relations – and staying in control of how we perceive a situation – we may avoid challenging both our own and the views of others. Moreover, we may respond to such challenges in order to prove that our position is right rather than trying to understand the challenge from another perspective and what additional information a different view may convey about a problem and its

eventual solution. Consequently, we typically fail to explore different perspectives in decision making. Instead we either pretend differences don't exist – in the worst case leading to “group think” – or engage in discussions aimed at proving our perspective right rather than exploring the others' perspective leading to endless unproductive meetings.

While differences in perspectives and experiences can hold the key to productive collective responses, for example addressing the COVID-19 crisis, their merger into something productive is by no means given. As illustrated by the above example, management teams may easily fall into communication and problem-solving patterns where these differences become a liability rather than a resource. But there are remedies to these issues. Based on a thorough review of different streams of the team-work literature, four distinct capabilities of teams have been identified that represent their ability to exploit their collective knowledge and to drive the effectiveness of teams (7). An increased general understanding of these capabilities of collective intelligence should help teams and their leaders address both the strengths and weaknesses in teamwork.

Four capabilities of the intelligent team

Collective problem-solving in a team involves both thinking and acting together. But a team has no brain, nor body, so all thinking and acting is necessarily individual. Therefore, the “brain” of a team is the communication pattern of the team members. Acting as one, as a unit, is about individuals coordinating their actions based on a shared mental model. Based on these fundamentals, there are four team capabilities that together enable teams to collectively behave intelligently, by making use of the team's collective expertise in both defining and addressing an issue. In our studies of over 100 knowledge intensive teams, four capabilities have been shown to drive team performance. These capabilities are representation capability, relation capability, integration capability and reflection capability (8).

Representation capability – capturing the multi-faceted nature of

the issue. Contemporary organizational issues are typically complex and ambiguous, involving multiple and often conflicting considerations. Successful teams have a richer understanding of their tasks and the context in which they are performed and have a shared understanding of the (knowledge) resources they possess. They also share a mental map of each other's competencies as well as an understanding of when these competencies are adequate to solve the problem. These conditions enable the team members to act individually but in the spirit of the team, while contributing to the joint team project. Indicators of a strong representation in team discussions include acknowledging and bringing up different perspectives of the issue, acknowledging (rather than denying) and discussing trade-offs between different interests, understanding the task in a broader context and trusting and relying on each other's unique competencies. A weak representation is recognized by simplified explanations and an inability to merge the different perspectives within the team.

In shaping a strong team representation, the team leader may be instrumental – but less as an expert defining the team task than as a facilitator making sure that different aspects of the tasks are brought up and explored. At the same time, it is the responsibility of each team member to voice the aspects and perspectives they view important. In order to create a more complex but also more valid understanding of the issue at hand, the team needs to identify the trade-offs and conflicts between different decisions that have to be made.

Relation capability – providing a safe zone to say what one thinks. Besides a strong representation, high performing teams provide an environment where team members feel they can speak their mind without fear of social sanctioning. They display high levels of psychological safety (9). This enables the sharing of different ideas and perspectives, also those that may deviate from what the majority believes, which in many teams are ideas that are otherwise held back. Team members can challenge each other but also feel supported by the team and its members. Indicators of a team with high relation capability are discussions whe-

re communication is open and flows flexibly between members, where potential failures and premature ideas can also be shared and where members listen actively to each other, exploring rather than dismissing ideas that they might not understand or like at first sight.

Building and maintaining relation capability in a team is a responsibility for each and every team member. A silent sigh, or eye rolling can easily extinguish the sense of psychological safety in the team, whereas a curious exploration of a different perspective or the sharing of a premature thought showing oneself vulnerable may contribute to building it. The team leader has an important role to play in acting as a good example. Additionally, in less developed teams the team leader can insure norm-guarding by addressing team member acts which, accidental or on purpose, can decrease the sense of psychological safety in the team.

Integration capability – taking responsibility for the team's work. Exploiting available knowledge in a team ultimately relies on the individual team members' active support of the team. Members need to make their knowledge and expertise available to each other – and they need to seek knowledge they lack themselves from others. They also need to engage in activities to build and maintain effective ways of working in this respect. Indicators of teams with high integration capability include: 1) the spontaneous sharing of unique perspectives – within and outside formal meeting structures; 2) the taking of individual responsibility for team decisions and tasks; 3) frequent reaching out to others for input and support; and finally, 4) a concern for how the team works - the process.

Building relation capability is challenging as it relies on team members' individual commitment to the team's task and its members. Thus, a strong representation may be helpful as this communicates the importance and meaning of the team's task. The more members perceive the team's task as important and see their unique role in realizing task objectives, the more committed they will be. Such an understanding may be created by a team leader's communication but ultimately every team member has the power to enforce – or undermine – the commitment of

one's fellow team members.

Reflection capability – enabling creative solutions. To capitalize on limited cognitive resources human problem solving typically relies on existing thought patterns and solutions. Given individuals' bounded rationality, we often settle on a “good enough” solution, which is based on “doing what we normally do”. This is also the most socially “safe” approach. Doing the expected is a good defensive strategy that does not surprise or upset. However, when a problem is new, or unfamiliar, which will often be the case in a crisis situation, this “good enough” solution may become problematic. In such cases, a different kind of problem solving that goes beyond the automatic application of standard solutions is required. A key aspect of this problem solving is reflection – the ability to iterate between different ways of viewing the problem and different potential solutions. Donald Schön (10) calls this process “reflection in action” – a conversation with the situation in which different problem definitions and solutions are tested. In a collective setting, the quality of this conversation will increase with the number of different perspectives on the problem that are considered. Indicators of a team's reflection capability include the explicit seeking of different voices, also from outside the team (e.g. from customers and other important stakeholder groups) as well as occasionally reviewing how the problem was defined, asking the questions “are we really working on the right problem?”, “Could we view and approach this in a different way?”

Fostering reflection capability is challenging because teams have a tendency to jump from problem formulation to finding solutions way too soon. A lot of time may be wasted if the well-developed solutions solve the wrong problem. This tendency to skip a proper problem formulation in order to get going with finding solutions is aggravated by pressure, which calls for a team leader – or team members – that help the team to remain in problem definition long enough, and occasionally revisit this, to ensure that it remains accurate.

Concluding thoughts

In our survey of managers about what the COVID-19 crisis meant to them, we also asked about how they perceived the quality of collaboration when dealing with the crisis. They painted a very positive picture, with a majority perceiving an increase in their ability to mobilize the organization's collective knowledge and collectively act intelligently. But didn't we say that a crisis challenges collective intelligence? Well, not necessarily. A crisis situation may contribute to a very clear representation that can align individuals around a current goal and drive high levels of integration capability at the same time as relation capability increases as people, rather than waiting to be convinced to trust others, start with the assumption of trust until proven wrong. A crisis can push teams either into better or worse collective intelligence. The good news seems to be that, at least in this sample, it most often pushed collaboration to higher levels. However, as the acute situation passes, the complexities of the long-term consequences will eventually surface the trade-offs to be dealt with, trust in some cases turn into suspicion and energy for integrating behaviors and reflection run out. This is when our need for collective intelligence will be greater, and team leaders as well as team members will need to work hard to secure it.

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