

The Spirit of Learning Session 4

The following blog post is offered to help convey the spirit we hope will inform this colloquium and the whole Career Pathways “cohort experience.”

Reading for Return to Circle

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Collective Intelligence in Philanthropy | Posted: 17 Jun 2011 08:19 AM PDT

This post by Eugene Eric Kim of Blue Oxen Associates. Eugene works with organizations to help them develop collaborative strategies. His past clients include NASA and the Wikimedia Foundation.

By Eugene Eric Kim

Recently I spoke at the GEO Learning Conference on collective intelligence. My focus is on collaboration, but thanks to the influence of my mentor, my frame has always been around maximizing collective intelligence for the greater good. While I’ve worked with foundations in the past, it was the first time that anyone in philanthropy had asked me to talk specifically about collective intelligence. In preparation for the talk I started thinking about great examples of philanthropy catalyzing collectively intelligent systems.

I couldn’t think of any. So I started doing some research. I still came up empty.

The basic premise underlying collective intelligence is simple. Sometimes, somehow, groups exhibit intelligence that far exceeds the sum of its parts. Ants are a great example of this. Individually, ants are – quite frankly – dumb. They do three things well:

They carry heavy objects

They leave trails

They follow trails

In isolation, this list is not impressive. But in collaboration with others, ants do amazing things. They build ant hills. They form ant rafts. There are no heroic leaders in ant colonies. Leadership is distributed. All ants are both leaders and followers. And because of these properties, ants, collectively, are highly adaptive, and their intelligence scales. When you add more ants, the system gets even smarter.

What would happen if humans behaved more like ants? Fortunately, there are great examples of humans behaving collectively intelligent. The real challenge is finding examples of humans behaving really, really, really collectively intelligent. This is not simply an intellectual exercise. It’s a matter of survival. Our society is literally on a path of self-destruction, and the only way to avert disaster is to start behaving collectively more intelligent.

A little bit of collective intelligence is not enough. We need a whole lot of it.

The problem is that it's hard for humans to act like ants, because unlike ants, humans are smart individually. Perhaps smarter than is good for us. The way we like to attack problems is exactly the opposite of how ants attack problems. We like to centralize control. We like to understand problems to completion – or at least pretend we do – before attempting to address them. This is exactly the opposite of what we need to do to be successful.

By definition, a collectively intelligent system should be too complex for a single person or even a subset of the group to fully comprehend. Otherwise, the system would only be as smart as that single person, which is to say, not smart enough. If we truly want to harness collective intelligence, we need to get over this idea that we need to fully understand the problem before we can act. That's neither possible nor desirable.

I don't need to rant about how slowly foundations move, or how they're afraid to fail, or how they seem fixated on control and understanding at the expense of action. Foundations are experts at saying these things about themselves. The question is how can foundations start shifting their culture so that they can become better at both catalyzing collectively intelligent systems and behaving more collectively intelligent themselves? I think there are three ways to start.

First, most foundations need to stop thinking of themselves as funders. Giving money away is a valuable tool, but it's not a high-leverage tool for solving the world's most complex social challenge. Foundations don't have enough of it, and there aren't market mechanisms for leveraging it effectively. Foundations are fantastic at doing research and getting in the middle of systems, but they don't leverage this expertise effectively. I think part of it is because they self-identify too strongly as funders. They need to think of themselves as movers of knowledge instead of movers of money.

This leads into the second thing foundations can do: Give knowledge away aggressively. The great thing about giving away knowledge is that, unlike money, it's an abundant, accumulating resource. The more you give away, the more the world has, and you can give it away as often as you like.

Third, be courageous. I love what my colleague wrote on this topic:

"The lack of external pressures, which gives philanthropy great freedoms, also requires us to draw on inner determination and discipline to achieve results."

In the face of structural resistance, change requires courage. "Courage" is a word that's not used enough in philanthropy. I think that's a shame, because we need much more of it in philanthropy and in the world. People need to acknowledge this, and they need to draw on it. The world is depending on it.