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Coaching International Leaders to Succeed Collectively:

The re-genesis of collective intelligence, our genuine capacity for collectively creating our future

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What if by simply getting access to our collective intelligence we could create a desirable future? What if through only meaningful conversations we could creatively discover new emerging possibilities? What if through mere collective leading we could create and implement the necessary variety of actions needed to cope with the diversity of challenges we face? These questions emerge as some of the challenging features of today's world of business coaching. Individual solutions, however brilliant, no longer seem sufficient to address today's complex business environment. Instead, we could make the 'law of requisite variety' one of our guiding principles of innovation and intervention. In 1956 Ross Ashby stipulated, 'when the variety or complexity of the environment exceeds the capacity of a system (like an organization) to create the corresponding variety of answers, the environment will dominate and ultimately destroy that system' (Ashby 1956: 202). Hence it follows that an organization or a group without the required variety will fail whenever it encounters the unexpected and ... die. We get a glimpse of the application of this law in business when leaders operate with a limited set of individual success strategies thus being unable to succeed

within a different cultural environment or when they use previously fruitful ‘business solutions’ to manage today’s complex collective challenges. In order to help our clients create the requisite variety of answers for them, we need to develop their ‘collective intelligence’.

THE SCOPE OF QUESTIONS

In order to set a frame for an appreciative investigation on collective intelligence in the business environment, a first set of four crucial questions ought to be addressed:

- (1) What is the business context generating the need for promoting collective intelligence?
- (2) How can we define collective intelligence?
- (3) How can we nurture the emergence of collective intelligence?
- (4) What do we have to change in the way we coach?

What is the business context generating the need for promoting collective intelligence?

The origin of the word ‘intelligence’ is its Latin expression ‘intellegere’, combining ‘inter’ (between), and ‘legere’ (choose, pick out) or ‘ligare’ (link) hence suggesting the capacity of connecting elements which, without such connection, would remain separated. Intelligence is hence connected to the notion of ‘space between the elements’. For a long time researchers have focused on how this phenomenon of intelligence emerges within individuals. The scientific community ended up creating the concept of individual multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993/2006). The business world has since been deeply connected to this idea. Executive coaches are regularly invited to help clients develop their various intelligences - emotional, relational, intuitive, creative, moral, spiritual, cultural, situational, and so on.

Leadership seminars promote this individual approach when focusing on how to develop individual capacities and intelligences. However, negative consequences are emerging from this mainstream focus on individual performance. These include e-mail overload, burn-out, taskforces that go nowhere, pointless meetings, never ending decision-making processes, too much data, not enough focused information, frustration of not getting the knowledge people need because of organizational walls and silos.

There is a general feeling that an enormous amount of the energy that leaders and organizational followers put into the system is wasted. Additionally, in the business world we can observe an increasing number of “relationship autistics” who get promoted as “single champions of ideas” but are desperately searching for some meaningful food for their “empty soul” (Aburdene 2005: 66, 115; Ridderstrale and Nordström 2008: xxi). It may be that the business world has overvalued individual excellence while neglecting the need for collective intelligence. Maybe today there are too many leaders who are successful individually but collectively approaching the edge of failure because they have not learnt to leverage their intelligences together (Bryan and Joyce 2007: 24). Advanced business leaders, coaches and researchers therefore decided to open the gateway for making collective behavior and collective intelligence an emerging field for exploring new ways of leading, learning and operating (Surowiecki 2004; Noubel 2006; Lovelock 1990; Scharmer 2007).

In parallel, today’s business world is an interconnected economy - people are always connected, the web will answer their queries and colleagues are just ‘a few clicks away’ (Ganascia 2007; Bloch and Whiteley 2007). A new generation of connective technologies invites people to participate in collective projects such as Second Life, Google, Wikipedia, Facebook, My space, etc. The common and underlying pattern of success of these connective

experiences via internet/technology seems to be a sort of enhanced collaborative work where people agree to combine their so called ‘tacit’ or ‘intangible’ assets such as knowledge, relationships and reputation in order to collectively create innovative applications and products (Linux).

During a conference, an English futurologist therefore promoted the idea of “overwhelming artificial connection being the next state in humanity” (Ray Hammond 2007). We may disagree with this notion that the destination of our humanity and the business world seems to become a cyber brain, a worldwide-connected knowledge machine or a fully intertwined computer. Nevertheless, this new technological field of space and possibility generates a specific type of ‘collective intelligence’ which connects people beyond boundaries, space, beliefs, cultures and time. Since technology and humanity are deeply interconnected (Scharmer 2007; Capra 2004) we have to leverage both, the technology and human web in order to help our clients create a different future.

Finally, leaders of global organizations face new levels of complexity and disruptive change. Monolithic corporations are replaced by a complex network of alliances, such as joint ventures, outsourcing relationships and global sourcing partnerships. Leaders have to find innovative ways to direct multicultural, multi-continent and multifunctional teams across organizational boundaries to create the necessary variety of responses they need to address this new era of complexity. They have to deal with the dilemma generated by their desire for structural leanness and the need for high levels of commitment, the desire for a flat hierarchy and the reality of impermanent project teams (see Scharmer 2007: 59; Capra 2004: 121).

Complexity and unpredictable challenges make it impossible for even the most self-directed, brilliant modern business leader to individually lead a global acting organization.

Some of them start to recognize that experiences and solutions of the past do not necessarily help when dealing with these emergent challenges of today and tomorrow. But knowing what does not work anymore does not necessarily mean that people look for new perspectives and different solutions. However, Ilya Prigogine, winner of the Nobel Prize in 1977, proposed a different model when demonstrating that any open system - such as an organization - has the capacity to respond to change and disorder by reorganizing itself at a higher level of organization (Prigogine 1984; Stacey 2005). There is a caveat. The elements of the system must have the freedom to take initiatives and develop the ability to create a repertoire of responses that can match or exceed the number of different stimuli it may encounter in its environment.

In order to create this repertoire of responses, we need to promote and strengthen the capacity of business leaders to think, learn and create their future collectively without exactly knowing what the future will be.

How can we define collective intelligence?

When investigating the idea of collective intelligence within international teams and multicultural organizations, there is a surprising variety of answers and controversial understandings. Whereas leaders are supposed to be driven by individual motivation, personal intention, bonuses, vision and clear objectives, they regularly mention collective experiences as their most important business experience with comments such as, ‘Only as a team were we able to challenge our company’s culture balance patterns’, ‘Because we were deeply linked by a shared intention, we were capable to overcome the strong resistance we faced’, and ‘Individually I was lost, collectively we were able to make sense of it’.

It also becomes clear, when working with multicultural teams, that some cultures are more driven by collective success and collaborative efficiency (Northern Europe, Japan) whereas other communities are striving for individual excellence and inspiring competition (France, Italy, US) (see Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 2004; Théry 2002). Most Asians seem comfortable with the idea of thinking collectively, while Western cultures prize and practice individual thinking (Lewis, 2007:137). Most Anglo-Saxon management books focus on individual success and personal development strategies. You find less on how to generate and develop collective intelligence and collective leading, at least in the western part of the globe.

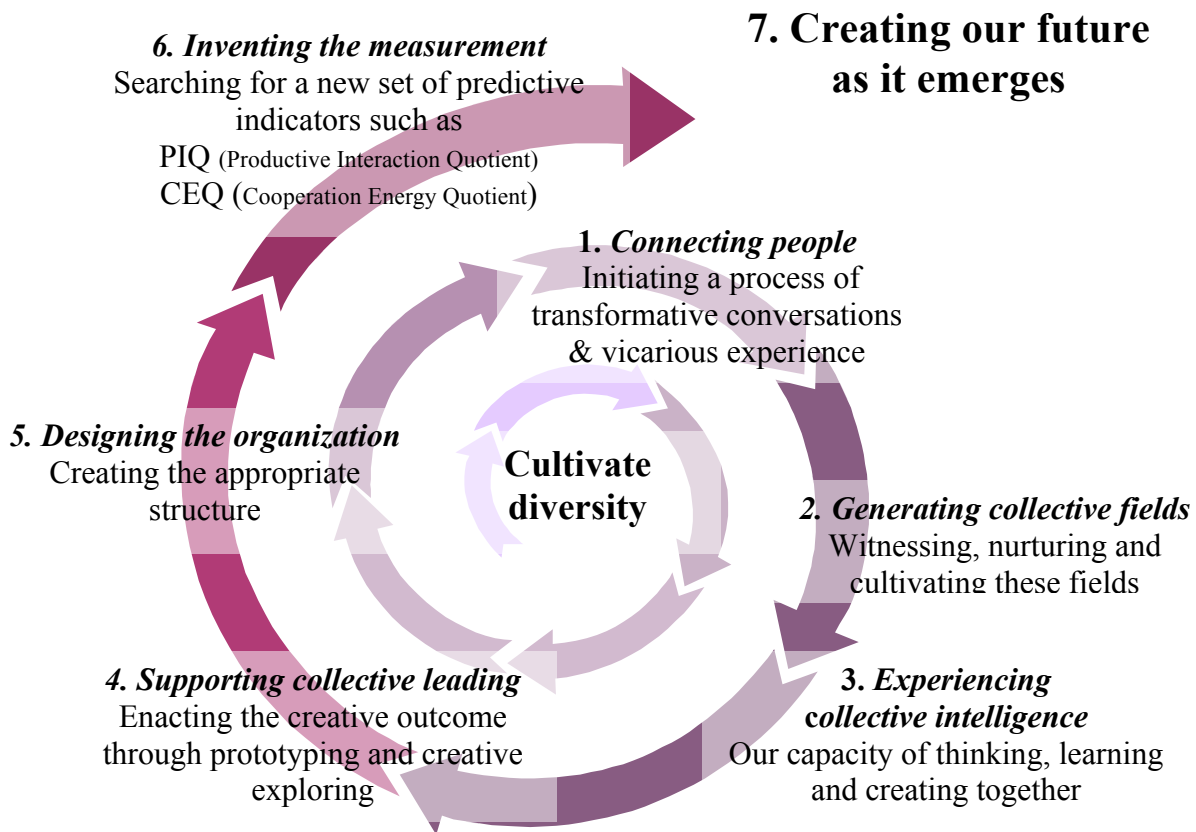
Additionally, the meaning of collective intelligence varies from one person to the other. Some business people use the idea of collective intelligence to ‘uplift’ standard concepts of teamwork, brainstorming and project management. Some replace ‘team spirit’ with collective intelligence; others consider that having organized an effective meeting is the result of collective intelligence. Again others associate it with the way people connect and create through the web. For some experts collective intelligence and knowledge management mean more or less the same or are at least deeply connected (Zara 2005).

But we also might listen to people who argue that collective intelligence motivates people to freely interact with everyone else in the company, to choose their working associations based on the nature of the work that needs to be done, to combine their knowledge, networks and approaches in order to create new responses which one person alone could never imagine. We might also agree with the statement of one top executive who closed a recent team brainstorming session (which I was facilitating) saying ‘In the beginning of humanity there was collective intelligence... our genuine capacity of collectively creating our future. We have probably lost it during our human evolution and we now are looking to rediscover its genius again’.

But a common definition of creative collective intelligence is still missing. Olivier Zara (2005: 13) defines collective intelligence as the capacity of an organization or group to (1) ask itself the right question and (2) find – collectively – the appropriate answer(s). François Noubel (2004/2006:2) defines it as, “the capacity of a group of people to collaborate in order to formulate their future and to realize it within a complex context”. Others speak about enhanced collaboration enabling people to create wealth through a twenty-first-century organization (Bryan and Joyce 2007).

When working with global organizations and international leaders, I discovered the ‘triple point’ of collective intelligence. In physics and chemistry, the triple point of a substance is the *temperature* and *pressure* at which three states (*gas*, *liquid*, and *solid*) of that substance may coexist in *thermodynamic equilibrium*. Applied to the notion of collective intelligence, the three states that coexist are collective intelligence as an experience, a mindset and a whole interconnected process of emergence. To generate collective intelligence, people have to engage in a process of transformational conversations and meaningful experience where they can connect information, knowledge and experience in creative ways (Cholle 2007; Stacey 2005; Naisbitt 2006). This process of connecting people ‘fills the space between them’ and generates different fields of connectivity, energy and exchange which I term ‘collective fields’. These collective fields influence people’s experience of collective intelligence which I define as the, “genuine capacity of a group to think, learn and create collectively”. In order to transfer the ‘creative outcome’ of this experience into daily business life, collective intelligence needs a vehicle which I term ‘collective leading’. Finally, we need to invent an organizational design and a new set of indicators which nurture the need to create

relationships and promote collective intelligence. This overall process can be visually summarized as follows and works both ways (Figure 1).



Applied to the business context in which international leaders operate and global organizations thrive, the whole process of collective intelligence could be summarized as, “the creative process of connecting people enabling them to generate fields of interpersonal connectedness, energy and exchange where they experience their genuine capacity to collectively think, learn, and create their future”. Collective intelligence under this perspective means both, a re-gensis of our genuine capacity to create together and a

significant shift of collective attention. Instead of focusing only on exchanging content and checking whether results are produced, people learn to focus their attention on their process of relating, to identify from which source they operate (past or future) and to listen to what the future calls them to do. It is the leap from collectively leveraging individual intelligences to collective thinking, learning and creating. It is the tipping point where a group accepts the risk to enter the field of the unknown where control is replaced by guidance, expertise by tacit knowledge and evidence of the known by emergence of the new.

How can we nurture the emergence of collective intelligence?

Promoting diversity

For collective intelligence to emerge, the first ingredient we have to promote is diversity, defined as mixture of differences, similarities and tensions (Sepheri and Wagner 2002: 123; Thomas 1996: 5). Working with others who are different from us, and doing so in creative ways, is a key element for requisite variety and hence a key ingredient for future collective success. However, individual differences and contradictions in collective cultural patterns turn out to be a major source for individual frustration, nasty climates of distrust and collective failure, hence preventing teams and organizations from generating meaningful conversations and experiencing collective intelligence (Zohar 1994: 182, 328). To overcome these genuine consequences of diversity business leaders tend to highlight similarities - 'we all are humans' - and to promote their 'identity creating company culture'. However, in over-emphasizing the collective aspect, diversity can become an undefined soap of similarities with no identity and no genuine force. As Danah Zohar (1994: 200) puts it, "the one gives us the Tower of Babel the other a sort of 'non inspiring melting pot of individuals'". In fact we need both to generate

collective intelligence - the 'particle' and the 'wave' aspect of diversity (Klein 2004:113; Wheatley 1999: 66). That is, we need the virtue of individual differences (the particle aspect) and, at the same time, the collective spirit and common understanding (the wave aspect). As in quantum physics, particles and waves co-exist as potentialities, so do these two aspects – individual differences and collective spirit - of diversity. It depends on the focus of attention we choose as coaches as to which of these genuine states of existence will collapse into reality and at which moment.

Searching for collective intentionality

Collective intentionality or the 'We-Intentionality' represents the second ingredient for collective intelligence to emerge. The etymological sense of the word intention means 'direct attention' (from the Latin 'intendere', to direct attention). Individual intentions shape individual actions but they will not generate collective intentionality and creating. When a team focuses its attention on sensing a possible underlying collective intentionality, team members initiate a process of conversation and interacting which provides the necessary structure for diversity to express itself through the uniqueness of each group member (Shaw 2002; Isaacs 1999; Zohar 1994). Collective intentionality is both the result of a process of meaningful connecting and its beginning. It is more than a collective objective or a shared vision. Instead, it is the process of directing attention to patterns of interaction, common understanding and individual uniqueness.

Mastering the art of conversations

Diversity and collective intentionality are not sufficient for collective intelligence to emerge. In addition, we need a creative process of connecting people and their ideas at a deeper level. The most appropriate process of creative connecting is to promote, nurture and cultivate multiple networks of transformational conversations (Shaw 2002). In its etymological sense conversation means the ‘act of living with or keeping company with’. Combined with meaningful vicarious experience, inspiring conversations become the human matrix for creating, transforming and learning. Mastering the art of gathering and holding meaningful conversations is becoming one of the key competences of today’s business leaders. Indeed, leaders testify that whenever there is a significant leap in the way their team works together, an organization embraces permanent learning and change or a highly emotional breakthrough is achieved, it generally flows from their investment of time in initiating and participating in purposeful and transformative conversations. Even so-called individual inventions are often the intermediate result of ongoing conversations (Zeldin 1998: 74).

In summary, the winning formula for collective intelligence to emerge could be as follows:

(Diversity + Collective Intention) x (meaningful conversations)

= Emergence of collective intelligence

Or: (D + CInt) x MC = ECI

What do we have to change in the way we coach?

Choosing our focus

First, we have to accept that the concepts of collective intelligence and collective leading are somehow provocative in today's business environment. Individual leadership, with its inherent limitations, remains the day-to-day activity for many who lead diverse teams and global organizations. The collective form it seems is emerging as a powerful metaphor, and as desire and food for imagination rather than as daily business practice. We therefore have to help our clients shift their focus and look at their organizations with new lenses, to consider their organizations as living systems and 'thinking creatures' and to see its web of relationships as a major underlying pattern of influence and identity (Zohar 1990: 27; Capra 2002: 12; Wheateley 1999: 14; Parikh 1999; Brafman and Beckstöm, 2007).

International business organizations are systems of complex and ever-changing interconnections. People working in these organizations have to create and navigate within these networks of complex human relationships all the time. They do it by phone, video-conference and meetings and they do it within constantly changing groups, alliances and communities. They create official ways of communication and hidden channels of communicating. As coaches we have to encourage meaningful connections and conversations, beyond existing silos, cultures and habits. We have to enable groups of leaders so they may create the most innovative organizational design for allowing these conversations to happen. And we can help enhance people's individual skills to initiate the process of collective intelligence in their business environment. Consequently, our common challenge consists in inventing possibilities for initiating and nurturing creative human interconnections while reducing unproductive interactions such as useless meetings, interface battles and information

hiding. By inviting our clients to create innovative predictive indicators such as a dynamic “productive interaction quotient” (Bryan and Joyce 2007:47) we can help them to invest in both, the living and dynamic web of relationships, the value of intangible assets and creative collaborative processes as well as in organizational structure, tangible results and concrete solutions. As Prigogine and Stengers remind us: “Whatever we call reality, it is revealed to us only through an active construction in which we participate” (1984: 293).

Leveraging dilemmas and emotional fields

Second, when coaching global companies, we have to take into account collective dilemmas. One consists in the fact that our elementary human attitudes, needs, ideas, and emotions seem to be the essence of diversity and thus the essence for collective intelligence. And they also are exactly those factors which jeopardize the process of meaningful conversation and creative connecting, thus preventing organizations and their leaders from leveraging their collective intelligence to create their future.

Another collective dilemma emerges when clients experience conflicting emotions during this process of connecting conversations. Sometimes it is enlivening, sometimes deadening, sometimes annoying or anxiety provoking, and on other occasions just useless. Indeed, the underlying emotional field for collective learning is often that of despair, frustration, irritation, polarization of thoughts and a sense of wasting valuable time. Emotions are contingent and if the collective emotional barometer goes down, we need to create space for these emotions to ‘leave the field’. Otherwise a group of people might get stuck in negative conversations and fall back into habitual discussion patterns. If we can hold and nurture that space and energy field for as long as necessary, the team will of its own accord

get out of it and generate the collective sensitive field where creative chaos becomes possible (Isaacs 1999: 253). There, they can collectively experience collective intelligence and feel what is at stake and sense what the emerging future might be for them.

Being capable of transforming negative fields of emotions, aggressiveness and distrust into positive collective sensitive fields and holding these various sensitive fields for the necessary amount of time without trying ‘to fix things’ is one of the most important prerequisites to be mastered when coaching the emergence of collective intelligence.

Develop cultural sensitivity

Third, we need to broaden our own cultural sensitivity. Cultural patterns influence individual strategies. Common business words such as ‘strategy’, ‘concept’, ‘performance’, ‘efficiency’ and so on carry whole worlds of different meanings depending on context and perspective. We need to be able to leverage cultural patterns, to go beyond our own prejudgments, to integrate stereotypes when working internationally, learning to coach in different languages and in silence. We have to learn how to leverage the underlying field of permanent misunderstandings as the essential “fuel for meaningful conversations”. We have to feel that cultural intelligence is a key ingredient for creating a sustainable business future.

Re-composing our mindset

To help our clients to leverage collective dynamics, intelligence, intentionality and fields, we need to integrate recent discoveries in science, and challenge our own assumptions. We need to ‘unlearn’ approaches, concepts, methods we are used to applying. The most important challenge is to depart from our past fruitful strategies of success and replace them with new

questions and an intention to explore the unknown. We have to become masters in creating collective transformative conversations, artists in moving a group through different collective fields, and experts in combining individual learning, collective thinking and organizational design. Approaches such as world cafés, open-space conferences and collective storytelling (Frenzel 2004, 2006) have to become part of our way to coach collective intelligence. We have to learn to let go of our obsession for achieving smart objectives in order to open up new possibilities for creating outstanding results. If we start to think that collectively we have access to all the wisdom, variety, agility and resources we need to cope with the variety of challenges we face, we can create new ways to facilitate the emergence of collective intelligence. Hence can we support our clients in exploring new territories of performance and creating innovative agile business cultures.

AN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS CASE STUDY

The company is in the industrial equipment manufacturing sector. It has 4000 employees who are constructing and operating three plants in Europe. In eight years operations will be expanded and there will be 11,000 employees in 30 plants all over the world. The coaching engagement described below was with a team of fifteen people established by the executive management group to create significant breakthroughs in terms of engineering, commercial relationships and financial results. All members were qualified in terms of technical expertise, some of them had managed cross-organizational projects and 10 had international experience. The team was multinational and communicated in English. At the time a coach was engaged, top management was increasing pressure and regularly requesting significant action plans and reports. Individual team members reported in preliminary conversations with the coach that they had never had the opportunity to reflect on the future they were supposed to create, the various fields of resistance and alliances they faced and their strategy of creating breakthrough. They all felt individually

competent but they sensed that the sum of their individual excellences would not be sufficient to make things happen under the current circumstances. Additionally, their underlying field of emotions was full of “negative vibes” generated by feelings of frustration, distrust, competition and cultural misunderstandings. The coach’s brief was to help the team achieve its objectives through an ongoing process of support.

Conversations to leverage diversity

A first team meeting was organized to articulate a common mission. Instead of facilitating a process of visioning or brainstorming the coach invited all 15 to take part in a process of meaningful inquiring conversations, thus creating the necessary environment for creative collective intelligence to emerge. Participants were asked to gather in groups of five and to discuss what their common mission might be. The coach did not give a precise set of rules, understanding that the concept of rules differs from one culture to another. During the first 20 minutes of exchange the group faced the phenomena of its diversity, which included a strong diversity of opinions concerning their mission. There was competition and conflict over deciding on ‘the best definition’. Team members reacted to arguments, opinions and ideas like handball goal-keepers in a training session desperately trying to protect their goal. Instead of exploring a possible common intention, these 15 individual leaders used this first conversation as an arena for searching for the best scapegoat, trading the best information and point-scoring. Their only focus on listening was a search for ‘conclusive evidence’ - i.e. they only listened to arguments which confirmed their respective opinions. The whole conversation ended in emotional manipulation, polarized clans, virtual ‘cultural slaps’ and common frustration. It was a perfect example of a group working from an underlying negative collective field of destructive emotions, also called the ‘battle field’ (see tool ‘The field of fields’).

When debriefing the process, members expressed their difficulties in understanding the meaning of what colleagues were saying because of the diversity of backgrounds both in terms of national cultures and of professional disciplines. They worked out that their communicative interaction pattern was formed

by power relations, cultural misunderstandings and consequent feelings of inclusion and exclusion. They shared that various degrees of individual internal resignation popped up over time and that a common desire to leverage differences with an intention of creating something collectively was completely missing. One participant summarized the first round of conversation, “I am impressed by our capacity of maintaining a highly sophisticated battle of arguments fuelled by a nice ‘I am right you are wrong’ mentality”. One participant added, “Our heads were at work, our hearts were asleep”. When asking them for options to listen differently, they proposed to engage in “listen for difference and surprise” instead of “excelling in listen-less listening”.

Misunderstandings are the rule more than the exception

With a new approach agreed upon, the coach asked every member to define his or her meaning of the word ‘mission’. Listening to each definition, the team recognized that this word opened a whole world of differences. They better understood why the earlier attempt to clarify the meaning of the word and to propose a common definition had ended up in confusion and conversational pathways leading to dead ends. They realized that the English language they used as common business language was working as an open source of misunderstandings rather than a bridge for understanding. During this conversation round, the group experienced “productive resignation” and accepted that international business contains a significant “web of culture traps”. However, some evidence of shift in perspective began to emerge. One participant concluded, “Let’s agree to differ” which was the first time that a glimpse of collective intelligence could be sensed: differences and agreement met in a sentence, unity was expressed as diversity. This proposal touched a collective nerve and created spontaneous overall acceptance. The energy changed and participants switched from a mood of ‘listening to respond’ to an attitude of ‘listening to inquire’. In other words they started to collectively suspend their immediate judgments, beliefs and disbeliefs thus gaining new perspectives. They left the ‘battle field’ and entered a new collective sensitive

field, called the 'Mental field' (see tool "The field of fields") where respect started to prevail. Constructive confrontation became possible and collective interaction became a learning experience.

In order to deepen this creative process of connecting, participants were asked to identify their major cultural prejudgments as well as their consequences in terms of behavior, intention and collective atmosphere and to exchange in groups of three. They shared that when working with people of different cultures (and gender) everybody had hidden assumptions influencing individual reactions, relationship patterns and emotions. They recognized that under stress or when feeling excluded, everyone had a tendency to become prisoners of their stereotypes, thoughts and emotions. They accepted that there might be a genuine intelligence of each culture, that culture is about collective programming and that each individual represented a part of his/her culture soul.

Invited by the coach to experience more of appreciative cross-cultural communication, team members explored the option of speaking in their own language, expressing their intention without words and sharing different frames of efficiency. As they started to respect each other's opinion and make sense from the various points of view, the level of misunderstandings declined and they started to develop a common language. They were able to collapse the various misunderstandings into a shared field of knowledge and meaning. Words were no more a hidden invitation for semantic discussions because collectively they now felt and sensed what they really meant in this group and this specific context. They perceived their diversity as a major ingredient for coming closer together and recognized that misunderstandings were the natural fuel for meaningful conversations more than its death. They realized that feeling they were at the 'dead end' with nowhere to go had provoked a common will to create some new common understanding. One participant concluded that session by expressing that, "to listen in depth we have to operate at the speed of sound rather than at the level of light". The group was aware of their new emergent capacity of thinking and learning collectively.

Loops of creative conversations, the field of inquiry and emergence of collective intelligence

The second part of the coaching process was designed to re-create a positive collective field and to focus on developing collective intentionality. This part was introduced by a collective exercise, called 'breakthrough exercise' (so called by the French Coaching School, International Mozaik): the group was first asked to get a position on a tablecloth and then invited to invert it without anyone "leaving" the nap physically. The effective combination of imagination, improvisation and interactivity helped the group to access their collective intelligence on a different and more vicarious level. The debriefing process, organized in dynamic conversation rounds inspired by the World Café philosophy (Brown, Isaac and the World Café Community 2005) helped participants focus on what was happening between them in terms of communication and dynamics. One person from each table, the host, was asked to observe the creative process of connecting and to share his or her insights with the next table, thus acting like a key pollinator for collective meaning through the whole session.

Entering the field of inquiry

For the next conversation round, participants answered the question, "What is at stake for the future, which dilemmas do we face and what are the opportunities?" When sharing the outcome, the group noticed that they developed a common sense of what was at stake such as, "creating our future", "shaping our market", "develop a culture of risk", "turning permanent pressure on results into zones of freedom" and, "stop justification and initiate conversation".

When sharing the answers to the next question, "What is our added value as a management committee?" they pointed out that, "We have to break the old patterns of this business culture", "We are pioneers and we challenge the traditional way of doing business" and, "We are on the edge and we are in a leap of faith". When expressing their added value as a feeling they mentioned 'Thrill', 'Endurance' and 'Aufbruch-Stimmung' (excitement of departure). The group was surprised to notice that they unconsciously

developed a collective intentionality of “pioneering, breaking the rules and doing things differently” and to share a common field of feelings oscillating between excitement and fear, between thrill and uncertainty.

In the next phase, tables were organized as business and cultural environments. Participants were asked to connect their collective intentionality to their business mission of creating significant business results in a short time and to stretch their collective awareness of organizational dynamics. One participant was to present the mission to another business line, one to Chinese clients, another to the top management committee and another to German partners. When facing the various reactions of resistance and/or alliance, the group became aware of the different fields of influence existing in their company and the need to adapt communication to cultural mindsets. “From market share to mind share” became their shared slogan. They expressed their mission in pictures, symbols, poems and paintings. They played with the position of cultural exaggeration where the Italian responded as German and the French as American (which in passing cleared up some of the former interpersonal difficulties) so as to really feel and understand their mission in all its facets.

The team experienced a web of relationships and had to juggle with a variety of channels of communication. Influenced by the forces of this new collective sensitive field of inquiry, they practiced appreciative listening and inquiry. They explored ‘meaningful confrontation’ ‘productive resignation’ and ‘choice creating’ (Isaacs 1999). One participant summarized his experience as follows, “Our future emerges through our conversations”. Another added the following comment: “Because we changed the way to speak to each other we were able to co-create new meaning which then opened the window for new possibilities”. Another stated, “New ideas emerged through the meeting of our differences”. To finalize, they experienced the field of inquiry and touched the field of emergence (see tool “The field of fields”) where trust and hope prevail, emergence of the new is the rule and energy is dense and focused.

From collective intelligence to collective leading: Reframing the notion of leadership

During the next 'conversation day' two weeks later, the group discussed the concept of leadership, its various cultural 'translations' and the consequences of those on their role as a leadership group. They started to think that leadership could be something different than an individual attitude. One group proposed that leadership could be 'the process of leading'. Participants were then invited to experience what was happening when they spoke to the 'centre of the table' rather than to each other. This shifted the nature of their conversation. Through focus on the centre, participants were able to stay in a more impersonal mode, thereby helping them to suspend their personal issues and judgments. When inviting them to listen to what the centre of the table was trying to communicate, rather than arguing with individual proposals or positions, it became easier for this group to embrace the underlying idea of collective leadership.

One participant initiated the next question, "What if collective leadership was a possibility to cope with today's and future challenges?" The consensus was that the current leadership framework was outdated, and not capable of adapting to the dynamic of unforeseen challenges and disruptive changes faced by the group. They agreed that within that context, which included inherent and ongoing changing power balances, no leader alone would be able to stand up, create a vision, download the vision to the organization and align its key processes. The idea of identifying one strong and/or inspiring individual leader in an environment where there were numerous potential leaders seemed inappropriate. Furthermore, it could potentially jeopardize the process of creative connecting and collective intelligence, thus slowing down any process of transformation and freezing their collective intentionality for creating a better future. They developed the idea of creating a different frame of attention by looking at leadership not as a thing, a task, or a capacity but to observe it as a process of leading, a kind of non-linear assembly line of various leadership tasks. They canvassed the idea that a group does always need an established leader to be effective but that at the same time a living system also needs a representative or 'speaker'

who expresses the common unconsciousness of the group and launches initiatives. Subsequently, others may take on the role of speaker and follow and propose actions and take the initiative to a next level.

In order to nurture the team's reflection on collective leading, the coach invited people to imagine how they could lead their mission collectively, what they would have to let go of, what they would like to do differently and what they would have to do more of. They agreed that for each 'conversation', one team member would take the responsibility to carry the shared decisions and the collective spirit through to the next meeting. Whoever wanted to take a specific initiative was free to act, provided that they shared the detail of the activities during the next conversations. They began to feel that collective leading was more powerful than investing an official 'team leader' with the burden of leadership, thus lessening collective responsibility and possibilities. They started to re-compose their collective patterns.

When the 'virus of collective intelligence' affects the whole system ...

During the following conversations rounds, the team created their own questions and exchanged on who could help them to make the next step. They worked out small next steps, and decided to explore the 'strategy of creative organizational prototyping' when launching an initiative. They regularly eliminated disturbing 'cultural viruses' (fears, frustrations) and agreed to maintain their 'wisdom circles' and culture of 'meaningful conversations'. They invited 'resistant people' to their conversations and spread the conversation processes and content. They knew that they were pioneers, meaning that they were likely to face strong resistance. But instead of reverting to accepting collective failure, they agreed on leading collectively.

The group discovered that an effective change process starts from within. They experienced that through the stream of conversations, they were able to integrate different initiatives of the whole business system. However, they also mentioned that the pressure on immediate and visible results was not easy to

handle. They shared an impression that some official leaders seem to feel a certain loss of control over the system and were taking initiatives to stop this new stream of ongoing conversations... without success. The collective initiative had developed resilience.

Later the team decided to create conversation circles with clients. They also organized co-development groups to create new solutions in real time through conversation. In this way they managed to create new networks of conversation and to spread their culture of conversation, collective action and effective support. They managed their conversation rounds on a regular basis, sometimes via phone conferencing. They learned to cultivate their diversity and to avoid its pitfalls. Any consensus achieved too rapidly was challenged and too much comfort was interpreted as sign of 'we are not discussing the important things here'. When different technical points of view met, they discussed them through and agreed on a collective set of options to maintain agility and the integrity of ideas. Small successes were shared, amplified and spread through the whole system. They consciously searched for opportunities to share learning from 'positive deviance', starkly contrasting from the old 'rule of silence' and conformity.

Witnessing the process of transformation

The coach's role was to hold the group far from equilibrium so that they stayed engaged in this collective process of silent transformation, which no individual was capable of controlling. It was their collective intention and interactions that explored and discovered new realities, behaviors and ideas. In the end, they achieved better-than-expected results, created fruitful relationships with their clients and proposed new organizational designs to the CEO. Without consciously so doing, they created a learning network and a business case for collective intelligence.

AND THE LESSON IS...

The collective approach helped the team leverage their cultural diversity, overcome individual resistance from within and manage individual anxiety and the tendency of 'group-think'. One

of the real dangers that a connected group can face is that of emphasizing consensus over consent and to exacerbate the human tendency to prefer the illusion of certainty to the reality of doubt, unpredictability and loss of control (Surowiecki 2004: 175; Zohar 1994: 254). The experience illustrated that a diversity of cultures, opinions and approaches is the single best guarantee that a group will avoid group-think and instead leverage the sea of possibilities emerging through conversations. The active search for minority standpoints forces a majority group to interrogate its own positions more seriously if the conversation environment is safe enough. Searching for cultural dilemmas enables a group to sense what is at stake and to look for new possibilities instead of fighting for a single superior outcome or approach.

All the conversations nurtured collective intelligence and the intention to create shared meaning. They allowed the team members to handle uncertainty, individual anxiety and a feeling of loss of control, and to embrace the possibility of ‘no concrete action now’. There was something which allowed this team to continue this process of collective intelligence and to avoid the collapse of their creative potential of diversity into former habitual pattern of technical discussions and endless argumentation. I suggest, consistent with José Fonseca (2002), that this something was a combination of curiosity, hope and trust: curiosity to experience the next step of the collective process, hope because it represents the necessary energy pioneers need and diffuse when they go forward and trust in the process, trust in the people and trust in their collective intelligence.

AND WHAT ARE THE TOOLS?

The Hidden Angel - Exploring the effectiveness of invisible support

The 'Hidden Angel' exercise is a powerful tool to generate new perspectives and encourage collective intelligence. In this exercise, each participant randomly picks another participant to become his/her hidden angel for a certain period of time, i.e. a day. The job of the hidden angel consists in supporting and taking care of his/her protégé(e) without revealing his/her "hidden angel identity".

This exercise introduces an interesting context of good will, protection and intention. People are inclined to pay more attention to what happens around them, they become more sensitive to synchronicities and are somehow 'forced' to participate in the field of collective protective intelligence. The key factor of success is that nobody knows their hidden angel but will be highly influenced by the fact that they know that there is someone looking out for them.

This exercise generates cross-contextual situations, facilitates debriefing and creates an exceptional taste for supportive and creative relationships. Since our clients are generally more accustomed to competition and survival than to protection and hidden support, this exercise is a great learning experience and can sometimes shift major individual and/or collective assumptions of the nature of support. And it is also interesting to note that some hidden angels forget to do their job; they sometimes even do not remember at the end of the day who they were supposed to support ... And the debriefing of this exercise under the cultural perspective often opens new insights since participants discover that each culture has its own myth of protection and support. A different and very interesting exercise that can be used by coaches is collective storytelling, as described by Patricia Shaw (2002: 98).

False friends or Faux-amis - Go for the difference

Main business concepts such as leadership, management, strategy, concepts, efficiency, creativity or performance mean different things to different people in different contexts. Asking a group to identify these words, their various ‘cultural translations’ and the consequences to the business of different translations is a powerful exercise. In order to make this exercise a breakthrough approach, it is important to urge participants to ‘go for the difference’ more than for the common understanding, to ‘force the gap’ more than to close it, to ‘hold the diversity’ of perspectives instead of fixing it. In the end, people will experience a deeper level of connection where they experience a coming together through their differences. Additionally, participants can be invited to identify their major prejudgments and stereotypes and their respective consequences in terms of individual behavior and collective ambiance. Helping them to transform their prejudgments instead of denying them, to accept them instead of criticizing others turns out to be a powerful way of coaching groups and organizations navigating within an international environment.

The ‘white whole’ or the ‘field of fields’

Creating transformational conversations and meaningful experiences are the starting point for collective emergence. Different conversations are influenced and created by different forms of underlying fields. Fields are spaces in which there is a particular quality of energy and exchange. Each of these fields has a different pattern of collective intelligence (thinking, learning and creating) and outcome. To guide a group from one field to the other requires the opening of gateways, the acceptance that people can be in different fields at the same time and that energy may flow without control and hence influence a group transformation. The

invisible underlying field connecting these various fields and energies, I term the ‘White Whole’ - the opposite of a ‘Black Hole’. Whereas a Black Hole absorbs all energy and light in the universe, the White Whole represents possibility, contains the future, generates energy and makes emergence possible through creative connecting. The different collective fields are summarized in the following ‘field of collective fields’ (Figure 2):

In order to move through these different fields, participants need to develop at least three different skills, i.e. the capacity to:

1. Suspend judgments, beliefs and disbeliefs;
2. Give up individual control and explore the unknown; and
3. Share at all levels (head, heart and hands).

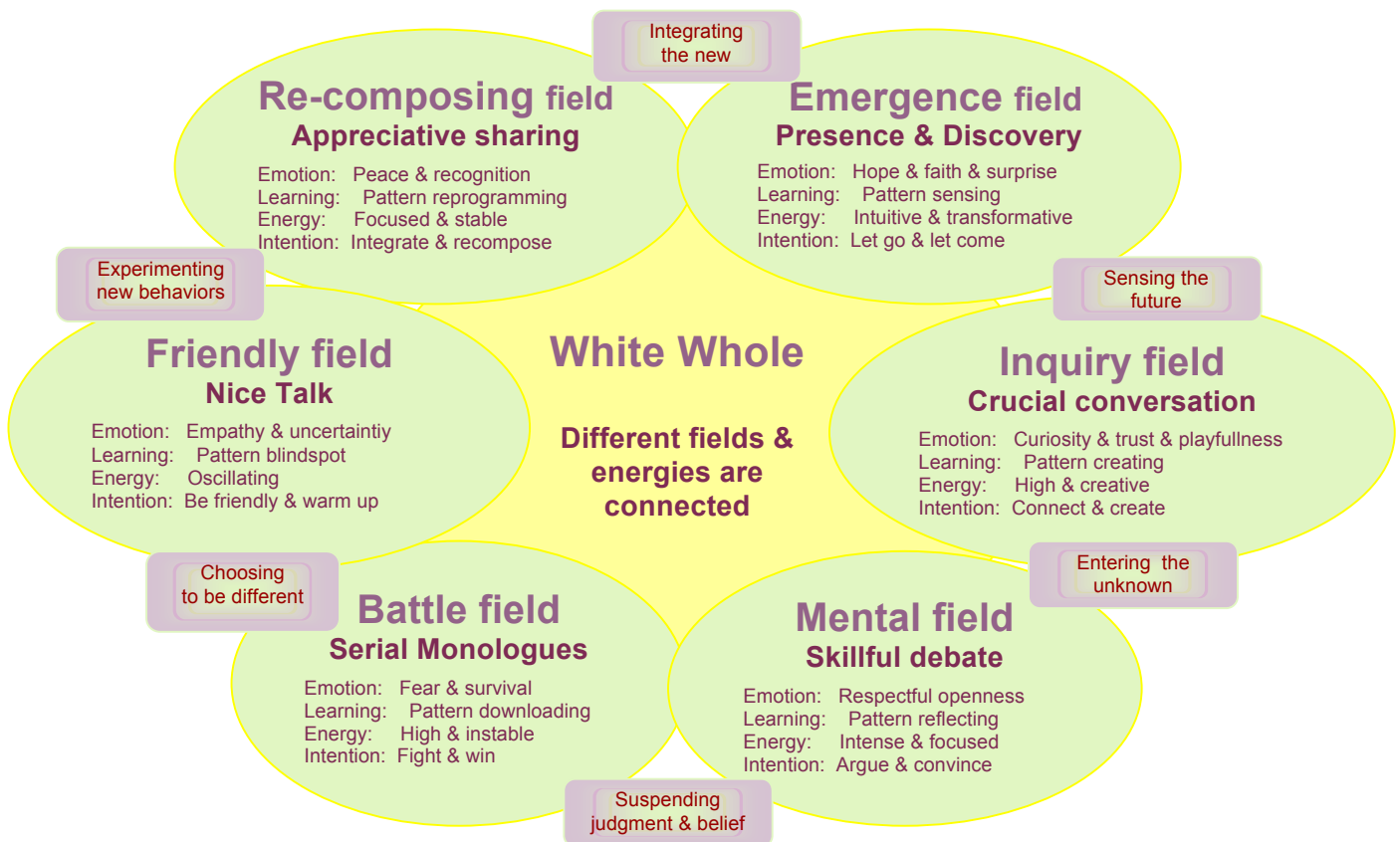


Figure 2

As coaches, we can assist this skill development and in so doing nurture individual excellence and cultivate collective intelligence. The role of the coach consists in:

- creating the environment for collective intelligence to emerge;
- facilitating the combination of vicarious experience and inspiring conversations;
- leveraging the architecture of the invisible (collective fields) and making collective ‘undiscussables’ (hidden rules and patterns) collectively discussable;
- providing structure and nurturing creative chaos;
- promoting the law for requisite variety and developing cultural sensitivity;
- inventing a different language to facilitate new perspectives; and
- fostering organizational prototyping of actions instead of rolling out detailed and aligned action plans.

CONCLUSION

Most of us are looking - individually and collectively - for meaningful breakthroughs in order to create the answers to the big questions we ask ourselves. Coaching collective intelligence may help us to create both individual and collective answers. However when we want to promote creative transformational chaos, far from equilibrium states, silent collective transformation and ‘suspicious’ conversation streams, we have to make fundamental and simultaneous changes in our way of looking at, connecting with, and managing our worlds. We have to change the way we look at organizations, our way of connecting and our way of leading. We need to focus on dynamics more than on ‘things’, we have to decipher and leverage the invisible rather than try to manage the visible. We have to give up our desire for control and we have to replace it with our capacity to facilitate emergence and connections.

We have to invent a different language such as the White Whole, Emotional Viruses, Future Fields, Mind Share, etc. to create new empowering perspectives. We have to give up our idea that there is ‘me’ and ‘them’ and leverage the creative tension of insiders and outsiders. We have to let go of our obsession for defining objectives and believing in the ‘world of measurement’ and instead communicate meaningful intention and create space for people to share. Instead of silent individual thinking we have to provoke meaningful sharing, instead of formal synergy groups we have to encourage transformational conversation circles; instead of individual leadership we have to inspire collective leading.

If we can help a group of international leaders to oscillate between a protective structure and creative chaos, to understand the dance between emotional fields and collective intelligence and to combine individual commitment and collective leading, they may be able to create a different future. If we succeed in helping a team and an organization put their ‘culture of relationships’ and their ‘matrix of connection’ at the center of their observation we may enable them to get access to a whole new world of possibilities, the world where collective intelligence is at work. In the quantum world, relationships are the key determiner of everything. Visible particles come into form and are observed only as they are in relationship to something else. And most importantly, relationships are not things, they are not predictable, they are not fixed in a specific form. Instead they are dynamic, they change form regularly, and they are always in transition (Wheatley 1999: 11). If this is true for quantum physics and the atomic level, how much more should this be true when human beings are involved in meaningful conversations and collective intelligence? It may be one way of creating the possibility of international leaders succeeding together.

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