

## **MANAGING DECISIONS: LISTEN TO THE CROWD**

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**T**he message is everywhere—in research, in professional opinion and even in quotes from famous people—that decisions made by groups are often more effective than those made by individuals.

Yet how often do we ignore such advice in our schools and, more specifically, in our libraries where working together can be the exception rather than the norm? How often do we mistrust the potential of a diverse group of people to reach a successful solution or decision; instead preferring to think that *'the well-informed people will be outweighed by the poorly formed'* (Surowiecki 2005 p 274)?

### ***What are the barriers hindering our acceptance of group decision-making as an effective strategy in the workplace?***

And how often do we believe *'that valuable knowledge is concentrated in a very few hands [and] that the key to solving problems or making good decisions is finding that one right person who will have the answer'* (ibid p. xv)?

What are the barriers hindering our acceptance of group decision-making as an effective strategy in the workplace? Perhaps such obstacles are rooted in the notion that decisions within a group of diverse opinions can only be achieved through compromise; thus producing decisions characterised by mediocrity.

In our desire to achieve an outcome, do we let emotion colour and tame our decisions in an effort not to create waves or do we acquiesce to those who have the loudest and strongest voice—regardless of whether it is a voice of

substance? If this is the tack we take, then it is quite probable that *'the mass never comes up to the standard of its best member, but on the contrary degrades itself to a level with the lowest'* (Henry David Thoreau in Surowiecki p. xv).

Contrary to those such as Thoreau who consider that groups tend to dumb down thinking, Surowiecki (p xiii) provides a compelling and convincing discourse, drawing on examples from a diverse range of disciplines, to suggest that *'under the right circumstances, groups are remarkably intelligent and are often smarter than the smartest people in them'*.

However, despite being surrounded by such evidence of what he terms **collective wisdom**, Surowiecki suggests we have a preoccupation with chasing the expert to assist us in effective decision-making.

Consider the notion of chasing the expert in a school context. How often do we invite experts

into our schools to provide us with information and strategies to assist in problem-solving and decision-making? This is not to say that such people do not have valuable contributions to make. However, in doing so, do we overlook the potential of our colleagues to produce collectively the same information (no doubt at considerably less cost). We also ignore the fact that these colleagues have a sound knowledge of the context in which the solution or decision is sought and that they will still be around in another few weeks or months to assist with those decisions or solutions.

We should, according to Surowiecki (p xv), *'stop hunting [for the expert] and ask the crowd instead. Chances are it knows!'*

To this end, he suggests that the collective wisdom of groups can be applied to three particular types of problems or decisions.

**Cognition problems** are those for which definite solutions can be reached. For example, the problem of where to locate the fiction section in a school library is a problem for which there is an answer and it is highly likely that the best answer will be achieved not by bringing in an outside expert but by considering the opinions of the crowd or stakeholders who use and manage that particular collection.

Unlike the other types of problems discussed by Surowiecki, solutions to cognition problems tend to be definitive and able to be reached more expediently. As a result, *'many coordination problems require bottom-up, not top-down solutions'* (p 270). Whilst vested interests may prevent the reaching of clear, definitive solutions that are optimal for all parties, chances are that smart solutions will be achieved.

**Coordination problems** are those that involve finding the most effective way for members of a group to achieve a certain outcome. Take, for example, the classic issue of classes competing for time and space in the library. This issue might well be solved using the authority or coercion of those in charge of the library.

As Surowiecki (p 86) notes, *'an army goose-stepping in a parade is, after all, very well coordinated'*. But schools are not armies and such a response is likely to result in large numbers of dissatisfied library users and possibly lots of empty library spaces as these users vote with their feet.

The more appropriate solution to coordination problems, suggests Surowiecki (ibid), is to let people find a way, without being directed, to *'make their actions fit together in an efficient and orderly way'*. Whilst vested interests may prevent the reaching of clear, definitive solutions that are optimal for all parties, chances are that smart solutions will be achieved.

**Cooperation problems**, the third type of problem for which Surowiecki suggests that the wisdom of crowds can provide effective solutions, are perhaps the most demanding.

Such problems involve the challenge of

getting all parties, including the disinterested or self-interested, on board to work for the common good.

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#### **Four conditions**

According to Surowiecki, if a group can satisfy the four conditions that characterise wise crowds in its approach to the above types of problems, then it is likely that its judgments will be accurate.

**Diversity of opinion** and **independence** are paramount to the wise crowd. In stating that *'the best collective decisions are the product of disagreement and contest, not consensus or compromise'*, Surowiecki (p xix) is not breaking new ground.

Michael Fullan (2004) for example, is a strong advocate of the need for creative dissonance in order to produce effective teams. The best decisions are the result of considering a range of interpretations, analyses and even intuition.

From this perspective, the best decision is not one where everyone modifies their thinking or actions so that everyone is happy (or at least willing to go along with the decision). Rather it's one that is the result of aggregated knowledge; one which does not necessarily reflect what any one person in the group thinks but rather *'in a sense, what they all think'* (Surowiecki p xix).

Hence, to cite an old adage *the whole is greater than the sum of the parts*.

In a group that is small and possibly socially connected, such as your library staff, there is a danger that the independence of thought, deemed so vital to a smart group will be compromised. Surowiecki (p 42) posits that

that *'the more influence we exert on each other, the more likely it is that we will believe the same things and make the same mistakes'*.

He continues that in small groups in particular, bad decisions can be made because the influence of people in the group can be more direct and immediate; thus increasing the likelihood of judgments that are volatile and extreme.

Independent decision-making by group members, therefore, does not imply rationality or impartiality. What it does do is firstly prevent the correlation of mistakes by ensuring that errors are not systemic—that decisions are not made only using common agreed knowledge. Second, it ensures that new information is likely to be fed to the group.

So, whilst the decisions may be biased and irrational, says Surowiecki (ibid), *'as long as you're independent, you won't make the group any dumber'*.

Groups that exhibit the wise crowd condition of **decentralisation** foster specialisation (which in turn can make people more productive and efficient) and subsequently increase the diversity of opinions and information that influence decision-making (ibid p 71). Greater in-depth or local knowledge of a particular aspect of an issue often means that an individual is more likely to have an effective solution to it.

Decentralisation's great strength therefore, as a condition of a group, is to encourage specialisation and independence whilst simultaneously providing the opportunity for the conversion of tacit knowledge to the explicit.

Surowiecki's fourth and final condition for the enabling of smart decisions by groups is **aggregation**—provision of a mechanism that converts private judgment into a collective decision. He notes that:

*Although a surprising number of groups ignore it, there is no point in making small groups part of a leadership structure if you do not give the group a method of*

*aggregating the opinions of its members* (ibid p190).

If groups are only established to advise on issues, rather than make a decision on those issues, then the *'true advantage that a team has, namely, collective wisdom'* is lost (ibid p 191).

Although Surowiecki gives little attention to educational issues in his many examples of smart groups and the wisdom of crowds, there is no denying the implications of his perspective for the way in which we manage and participate in decision-making in our school libraries and in the broader school community.

His message is simple and obvious.

Involve stakeholders in decisions that affect them by honouring their diversity of opinion and independence of thought. Give them the opportunity to voice and share these opinions, thus encouraging the development of solutions that are potentially more relevant and appropriate than those conceived by any individual.

As Surowiecki (p 282) concludes,

*while trusting the collective judgement of a group may be difficult [if not alien]... in the long run, the crowd's judgement is going to give us the best chance of making the right decision... in the face of that knowledge, traditional notions of power and leadership [and management] should begin to pale.*

**Di Laycock**

### References

Fullan, M 2004, *Leading in a culture of change personal action guide and handbook*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Surowiecki, J 2005, *The wisdom of crowds*, Anchor, New York.

### Further reading

Miller, P 2007, 'Swarm theory', *National Geographic*, July, <<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0707/feature5/index.html>>.