

PREFACE

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What if we could use the knowledge distributed across society to produce better solutions to public problems? Everywhere we seem to find evidence of the delusions of large groups, especially when it comes to politics: online misinformation, partisan tribalism, public decisions driven by emotion more than fact, procrastination, and ideologies that restrain the range of options considered, etc. As we were putting the final touches to this book, the Russian government was waging a war on the people of Ukraine, not least for choosing a development path based on freedom of speech, free elections, and democratic participation. Vladimir Putin and other neo-totalitarians around the world reflect the old wisdom that a leader with no constraints on his or her power and missing diversity in decisions are always a threat to peace and human welfare.

And yet, we can also witness around the world inspiring examples of minds coming together to solve more effectively some of our most complex problems. Consider, for instance, the collective resilience and thoughtfulness that the world witnessed in the COVID-19 crisis. Producing a vaccine was predicted to take at least two to three years. Scientists and public health experts from different countries had to share information rapidly. Laboratories had to bring together researchers from different disciplines, each contributing a critical skill set. A huge network of individuals had to work in alignment to manufacture, test, license, and distribute the vaccine: doctors, regulators, pharmaceutical companies, supply chain experts, communications specialists, and community non-profits. None of these actors had sufficient expertise on their own to handle those tasks and deploy them on a world-wide scale. Together, a vaccine was created in eight months. Health measures were adopted at unprecedented speed, perhaps chaotically, some controversial, others possibly detrimental to democracy. Yet, in sharp contrast with the Spanish flu pandemic of the early 20th century, collectively hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of lives were saved. As a species we observed, learned, developed solutions, spread them, and are still learning and adjusting as we go along. No less than five stories in this book recount the unprecedented efforts to elicit collective intelligence to tackle the global pandemic in a more inclusive and participatory fashion.

Throughout history, collective intelligence has not been the exception – it has been a rule to help humans survive. In fact, for most of human history, we lived in small tribes and made collective decisions. Through conscious learning, has gained the possibility of adjusting and

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improving the mental processes and behaviors that we inherited from the past. However, as we moved from small groups to large societies, the coordination costs of collective decisions rose, and hierarchies became more efficient. Now, the rising complexity of problems has outmatched the ability of hierarchies to track and solve them, while technology has considerably reduced coordination costs. At the same time, disillusionment about politics in general and representative democracy in particular have created urgent demands from citizens that governments open up and create new models of “thinking like a brain.”

What if the solution to such crises rested in better understanding whether and how collective intelligence can be harnessed more efficiently by governments and democracies in particular to meet people’s needs? This is a question that we see more and more policy makers, citizens, activists, scholars, and students of politics posing today.

The purpose of this handbook is to explore, in theory and practice, the opportunities and the challenges of collective intelligence in solving our most urgent public problems. In the chapters and case studies contained here, we hope to:

- Help readers discover some key aspects of the emerging science of collective intelligence, with clear explanations of the most recent insights into how to organize and facilitate complex collaboration;
- Inspire change-makers, both public servants and active citizens, to design better participatory methods that effectively harness the intelligence of the community;
- Equip readers with practical methods, tools, and strategies to develop their own initiatives in collective intelligence and make them sustainable – noting that while principles may travel well, practices will need to be adapted to local contexts.

This we tried to do by bringing together 36 case stories. Each has three sections around those goals: providing inspiration, sharing the science, and identifying key do’s and don’ts. The stories and their analysis are brought to you by an impressive array of experts, some academics, some practitioners, from a diverse range of regions and cultures. These examples do not aim to be encyclopedic in nature. And there are many more concepts related to the science of collective intelligence and governance than we could cover in a single book. Our goal with these theoretical chapters and 36 cases is to illustrate the vast range of concepts required to understand the potential and complexities of collective intelligence applied to public problems. As you will see, some protagonists of those stories very deliberately put in place methodologies informed by the science of collective intelligence. In other cases, they may not have used the terms “collective intelligence” as such nor necessarily referred to explicit protocols. But in all the stories told, you will see how participatory processes were deliberately redesigned to foster better outcomes.

The introductory chapters sketch out the key concepts and references needed to understand the full complexity, potential, challenges, and limits of fostering collective intelligence at the level of a community, a city, a nation, or across several nations.

Our conviction is that we stand at the beginning of a major paradigm and systems shift. As in all such previous moments, this transition comes from new pressures from our environment that force us to develop new tools and organize ourselves in new ways. There is no foreordained outcome; the coming decades could see humanity become far less democratic, or far more so. What is certain, based on the lessons of our history, is that societies that cling to the *status quo* will falter, and societies that constantly innovate – and more importantly, that reinforce their capacity for continuous innovation – are likelier to succeed. It is our

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belief that the intelligence of the many will outcompete the intelligence of the few. But we need to get to work, and this book is here to cast some light on that arduous path.

And now that this handbook is complete and in your hands, an equally important stage – of practice and knowledge exchange – is just beginning. We aim for this handbook to be a shared resource of a growing community of practice that we hope you will join.