



Collective and Wisdom Makes the Difference

It started with a bolt of lightning in an area of wilderness known as Mann Gulch in Montana. In a telling case study of collective failure, twelve young smokejumpers and a forest ranger lost their lives battling the flames that erupted. Everything that could have gone wrong that tragic day seemed to, including the final moments when an action was taken that might have saved them. Wagner Dodge, who headed the crew, came up with a brilliant tactic. As the flames from the fire whipped their way toward the men, he bent down and lit a fire to the grass in front of him. As the fire spread, it burned in a widening circle. Standing in front of this wall of flame, he stepped through onto a small charred patch of ground that

allowed him to “hide” within the larger body of the blaze. This was not a *backfire*, in which an area of ground is burned in front of an oncoming blaze to create a firebreak. There was no time. This was simply a case of an in-the-moment reaction.

From within the burned-out patch of ground, Dodge beckoned the two men closest to him to follow him in. They could not hear him amid the sounds of exploding trees and screaming winds, but they could see him frantically waving, motioning them to follow him inside the circle. Instead, they glanced his way and kept going. And then the rest of the men passed by, not one of them following their crew chief into the safety of the circle. With the exception of Dodge and two men who miraculously stumbled into an area barren of vegetation, everyone perished. It was the worst disaster in Forest Service history.

There were certainly lessons here about leadership, especially in this particular circumstance, which later documented failed relationships among the crew and a command-and-control style of leadership. There were also lessons about the need for cooperation, trust, teamwork, and coordination, lessons the Forest Service took seriously and which transformed their ways of preparing teams rather than just individuals.¹ Yet, at a deeper level, there is a more fundamental question. What allows us, in groups and larger collectives, to find solutions amid complexity and daunting circumstances, to make wise choices and work together, as opposed to splintering apart and failing to see what opportunities arise? How can we *together* find solutions to pressing and bewildering problems that face us every day? How

can we know when and how to join with others, stepping through fire if necessary?

The failure at Mann Gulch was not due to any one element alone; the science of firefighting was at an early stage, wind direction is always unpredictable, and bad luck played its part. We all understand how external conditions can dictate the outcome of a situation. What stood out, however, from the studies that followed was something internal to the group. There had been an assumption, which proved tragic, that men individually trained, put on a plane without even knowing each other, and given orders to obey their crew chief without question would know what to do when their circumstances changed dramatically. There had been precious little understanding about how to prepare groups to improvise when necessary and trust in each other.

The lessons learned from Mann Gulch were not a call for just any change, but for a change in thinking about how to save lives. The tragedy moved the Forest Service in the direction of thinking collectively: how to train men together and create greater collaboration among the various disciplines involved with fire safety. They dedicated themselves to the question of how best to make sound judgments as teams and to cultivate the intelligence that existed from the bottom up, from the smokejumpers and firefighters who fought the fires. It is a lesson we must now learn on a much larger scale.

The Power of Collective Wisdom is a call for people to come together to think collectively about the circumstances they face. It is a guide to reclaiming our participation in groups as positive, necessary, and hopeful without sugarcoating the external challenges we face or the internal obstacles that prevent

us from seeing new possibilities. Wisdom reflects a capacity for sound judgment, discernment, and the objectivity to see what is needed in the moment. Collective wisdom reflects a similar capacity to learn together and evolve toward something greater and wiser than what we can do as individuals alone. This book emerges from a deep conviction that we have a stake in each other and that what binds us together is greater than what drives us apart.

THE NEED FOR THIS BOOK

We must find insight and ways to cooperate with each other at a depth and scale that is unprecedented. We see this need appearing everywhere—on the front pages of our newspapers, in our organizations, and even within our network of family and friends. If we cannot find legitimate ways to join together, to cooperate and to understand each other, we will not find solutions to the dysfunctionality and messes that seem to be growing all around us, let alone to the largest problems that beset us as nations and as a world community, such as global warming, poverty, and war.

We cannot any longer

- kill our way out of it,
- deny that it is happening, or
- rationalize that this is just the way it is.

If we do not turn the temperature down, literally and figuratively, on the global challenges we face and the polarization and fragmentation we live with on a daily basis, we will

be staring down a path of untenable choices. Are we willing to gamble our future and our children's future on more of the same?

Change happens on a macro systems level but also on a micro level—one conversation at a time, one group at a time, one new idea spawned among a group of committed people, setting off a chain reaction of new possibilities. We believe this kind of transformation not only is possible but has always been the way change happens. Transformation, even on a large scale, has a personal dimension, and each individual matters. We believe such transformation involves a fundamental shift in our thinking, and an understanding and embodiment of collective wisdom.

We believe our capacity for collective wisdom is innate and its emergence in groups catalyzed by awareness of a compelling need and a higher purpose. The global crises we face, ranging from economic instability to resource sustainability, are each day encroaching more on our personal lives. There is a clear rationale for collective action. We see the beginnings of a social movement, grounded in wisdom, percolating up through social networks in the business world, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and cross-cultural affiliations. In every community and organization are those whose uncommon behaviors are empathic, collective in their orientation, and far-reaching in their vision. We already have the human resources necessary to make a difference. Amid the crises we face is also an opportunity for seeking fresh perspectives on a grand scale. This book provides a framework for that search and a name for that movement.

Mark Gerzon, a leading conflict resolution facilitator and leadership trainer, and the author of *Leading Through Conflict*, wrote to us, “Humanity is hungering for wisdom. That is the word I hear most: not *compassion*; not *love*; not *peace*; not *kindness*—but *wisdom*. The other words all have deep meaning and their own unique power. But wisdom is the one that seems to magnetize people across the broadest spectrum around the world. I found myself drawn to this word because it is a cross-cutting theme in so many of the very diverse settings in which I am traveling.”²

*DEFINING OUR TERMS: COLLECTIVE,
WISDOM, AND THE TRAP OF FOLLY*

The dictionary defines *collective* as denoting a number of persons or things considered as one group or whole, marked by connection or similarity among or with the members of a group. In general, we use the term to designate a larger wholeness that may not be visible to the individual. For example, in groups we may be hardly conscious of being part of a collective because we see the world through an individualistic orientation. It is sometimes only in extreme circumstances or crisis that we recognize just how critical it is for groups to form a joint identity or combine and coordinate their diverse elements, or to become united behind a common purpose.

More often than not, we have a tendency to treat everything as separate and divisible. We analyze organizational structure and break it down into departments and functions. We diagram workflow and break it down into processes. We

evaluate people and break them down into skills or job classifications. In a hospital setting, people can become diagnostic categories or simply dysfunctional organs, such as “the bad kidney in room 6.” We are so used to breaking things down into parts and pieces that we forget to look for what binds us together.

We must learn to shift our perspective back to what makes people and groups whole, to find what connects us together as a family, an organization, a nation, a world. Yet to do so requires a special kind of awareness. Collectivity without vigilance can come at a great cost. The collective can rob us of our distinctiveness, force upon us conformity, and rally us to war against an “other” who is not seen as part of our designated group. The collective can easily become synonymous with mobs, groupthink, and the lowest common denominator of group consensus, sacrificing anything original or even relevant to the circumstances that need to be addressed. Our book recognizes this in the form of collective behavior that leads to folly.

We define *folly* as lacking good sense, prudence, and foresight, a continuum of behaviors ranging from personally foolish behavior to criminality, evil, and depravity on a mass scale. Folly lacks discernment of fundamental human values and is a refusal to accept existing reality or to foresee the inevitable consequences of its actions. The result of folly can be mildly disconcerting or reach a scale of utter destruction and tragedy. It is a trap that all groups may find themselves in at some time and, once they’re caught, difficult to extricate themselves from. Our book presents folly as a potentiality of every group and often the consequence of two related yet

opposing dynamics: One is the movement in groups toward polarization, and the other is the movement toward false or forced agreement among the members.

We offer an alternative that is both hopeful and grounded in our research of groups. We believe the alternative is the human potential for finding ways to constructively work together and pursue wise action. By wise action, we mean the ability to exercise sound judgment, demonstrate good sense, and reflect a depth of understanding about people and situations. Wisdom in groups is demonstrated by insight, clarity, objectivity, and discernment rooted in deep caring and compassion.

By definition, wisdom is associated with accumulated philosophic or scientific learning but is distinguished by qualities of reverence and respect for life. *Wisdom*, as we use the term in this book, reminds us that we are part of something greater than ourselves alone. At a personal and group level, we link wisdom with thoughtfulness, an ability to reflect deeply on personal experience, and a capacity for applying discretion and intuitive understanding. Wisdom is a form of knowledge marked by our ability to discern the inner qualities and relationships of a situation. Considerate of multiple perspectives and forms of intelligence, wisdom often shows up in flashes of insight and new ways of understanding a situation. In groups, this can come in the form of *emergence*, something original or unexpected that moves the whole group forward or ties together disparate aspects of a situation.

When we join together the terms *collective* and *wisdom*, we reach a whole new synthesis of insight and revelation. Like binocular vision, in which both eyes are used at once, joining

collective with wisdom is a way of seeing with added dimension and depth. The collective eye can pick up patterns of order, variation, and connections; wisdom can detect meaning and human values that arise spontaneously from a particular situation. We achieve, to paraphrase the words of the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, an ability to weave together the slender threads of a fractured whole into a firmer pattern of meaning. To share collective wisdom with others is to make meaning from disparate threads and weave together a fresh understanding.

THE POWER OF COLLECTIVE WISDOM

So why should collective wisdom matter to us personally? Real change comes from an awareness of our deep connectedness. For some, this may mean a spiritual awakening, a transformation that begins with the human heart. For others, it may be a more intellectual process, coming to see anew the need for addressing an emerging environmental ethic and related social issues involving business, health, education, and the disparity of wealth within and between nations. However we come to this new awareness, the promise of wisdom offers something unique that is often absent from more traditional approaches to innovation, change, and progressive ideas. Wisdom offers greater meaning regarding the value of life for oneself and others. Wisdom teachings invariably draw our attention back to the indivisibility of the whole and the immediacy of the moment.

At the collective level, wisdom holds the key to redefining communities in the service of alternative futures that are

life giving and sustainable. Collective wisdom invites us to think about the necessity of networks of people operating at the grassroots level to improve, invent, and discover new ways of enacting positive results. The outcome of a collective process that is wise is more likely a sound decision that goes beyond partisan concerns, and speaks instead to the aspirations of what is best in us and best for the circumstances at hand.

Collective wisdom helps us transcend the duality of self and others because it is a reminder that we are part of a larger framework from which we act out our role. As Shakespeare recognized, alone we are merely players, each with our exits and entrances, but as members of something larger, we become something extraordinary. “Consider,” another wise poet said, “how the stars that shine more brightly manage to combine in constellations, get a name.”³ So too with collective wisdom: When we are in service to that which is life affirming and needed, we become something greater in combination with others.

The power of collective wisdom is to elicit new perspectives that reflect our common humanity and heal the divisions that keep us separated. Our ability to contribute to a better world, locally and globally, is magnified when we do it effectively with others. Similarly, dysfunction and divisions limit our contribution and lead us collectively into paralysis and negativity. Groups can be avenues for wisdom or unwittingly fall into traps of collective folly that foster false agreement and destructive polarities. The contribution of this book is to help readers navigate change that is alert to the potential of both wisdom and folly.

THIS BOOK AT A GLANCE

When human beings gather in groups or in communities, a depth of awareness and insight, a type of transcendent knowing, becomes available to us that can inform wise action and extraordinary results. We call this type of knowing *collective wisdom* and believe it to be a potential of *all* groups as an innate human capacity.

In chapter 1, we discuss what collective wisdom is and the qualities associated with the experience. Collective wisdom, as the phrase suggests, is not of the individual alone or purely an insight of the intellect or mind. Sometimes spontaneous in groups, sometimes the outcome of an extended period of time and attention, collective wisdom is a potential of all groups and is marked by an experience of deepening connections: within ourselves, with each other, and to larger natural forces involving nature, spirit, and our place in the cosmos.

While collective wisdom can have positive, even dramatic effects on our efforts in groups, we cannot will it to arise. The appearance of collective wisdom is unpredictable and often difficult to put into words, which reflects both its quality of immediacy and its deeper underlying purpose. The power of collective wisdom lies in its ability to be an emergent phenomenon—from uncertainty, inquiry, and dialogue come new meaning, learning, and unanticipated ways to move forward. Although we cannot will collective wisdom to arise in groups, we can make preparations that encourage it to emerge.

In chapter 2, we discuss six stances that can deepen our capacity for wise action and prepare us for collective

wisdom to arise—illustrated with stories from diverse settings and times in history. We learn that we can increase the likelihood that collective wisdom will arise through the quality of how we listen and the conscious effort we make to suspend our personal certainty and seek diverse perspectives. We have the ability, personally and in groups, to read between the lines and listen with the wisdom of our heart.

In chapter 3, we explore these stances more fully by seeing how our internal perspective and external actions constitute a worldview. Through reflection on how our reality is shaped, we become better able to see the contours of a new consciousness, one that is more likely to create a positive future with others. The root meaning of the word *wisdom* involves seeing truths hidden from the casual observer. We bring attention to alternative worldviews that suggest we may be part of a larger collective consciousness, and why.

Being alert to wisdom, however, includes a necessary vigilance. In chapters 4–6, we discuss the pitfalls of an opposing potential—*collective folly*. Collective folly is a trap that all groups find themselves in at times, existing on a continuum from misguided or foolish behaviors to large-scale acts of depravity. As with collective wisdom, we believe that collective folly is a potential of *all* groups and is amplified by group dynamics involving polarization and false agreement. Every day, human beings commit small acts of foolishness and injustice, as well as unspeakable acts of violence and cruelty, within our families, among our friends, and against groups of strangers small and large that we deem as “other.” By being alert

to the potential presence of collective folly, we become more adept at cultivating a group wisdom that is realistic and tangible—unleashing extraordinary potential for innovation and change.

In chapter 7, we tell stories of groups and their capacity for innovation and change that reveal the power of collective wisdom for healing, creativity, and conflict resolution. Collective wisdom occurs most reliably when group members feel both safe and challenged to find what is best in themselves and what is best in and for the group. From such a vantage point, it becomes possible to heal old and current divisions, to experience true belonging to a vital community, to act creatively, and to feel hope about the larger world. When groups come together like this, a new threshold of co-creative power is reached.

In chapter 8, we learn how to embody the power of collective wisdom in acts of mindfulness. We learn how to continually return to the immediacy of our circumstances, create safe spaces for inquiry, and cultivate our transformative powers in the context of groups. Mindfulness keeps our attention on the present moment even as we must learn to act strategically and from a long-term perspective. Sometimes mistaken simply for a way to solve problems, the power of collective wisdom is in its ability to alter the way we pay attention to what will help us solve problems together. It is an affirmation of the common humanity we share with others.