Everyone has heard about brainstorming initiatives and idea generating workshops. Many companies are flourishing in that sector and they pursue one single objective: helping both individuals and corporates to sustain innovation challenges.

What are they based on? How do they materialize in today’s corporate environment?

Let’s start by the beginning.

THE KNOWLEDGE PILLARS

Several living species on Earth are considered as beings with superior intellect, ie able to link two things and come up with a logical result (intelligence < inter- legere), which is the definite asset of human beings. Homo Sapiens have managed to control the planet thanks to their superior intellect and their ability to exchange with their likes. Such communication and knowledge transmission was a gift as it enabled them to perpetuate intelligence through transferring knowledge from one generation to another.

However not all living beings have the same superior intellect, for example the octopus. Nature has not given her the ability to pass her knowledge on, not even her experience, as octopus babies grow away from their mother. They are lonely creatures and have had to learn everything for thousands of years. Every generation of the octopus species has to start from scratch all over again.*

Human beings are not thinkers on their own or geniuses without a context. When several individuals exchange views, it involves them, their knowledge interacting with each other, their emotions, their stories, their experiences etc. Beyond sharing their individual intelligence, they create a knowledge network composed of numerous lines and dots. Sharing is essential to sustain the network creation and to allow connections to take place.

In 1950, scientists discovered that the elementary units of our mind were very specific cells called neurons, set up into a « neural network ». Our most valuable tool, our mind, is made up of a network of information and knowledge itself!

THE NETWORK SHAPE

It’s amazing how things become clearer when one takes notice of the word semantics! Very often a network is defined as a dot connexion. By the way, doesn’t the expression « Connecting the dots »** remind you of someone?

A network is complex. Unlike chains of elements which would only be defined as complicated, the network structure is composed of various and diverse interconnections.

Let’s get a closer look at the following images to figure out the difference between these two notions:

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She graduated from ITECH (school of engineering) and EM Lyon Business School.
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COMPLICATED: many lines from which you can identify the patterns. You can find the original source, the common core information.

Without sharing and willing to exchange, the knowledge network cannot work. It may happen that lines of thoughts cross each other as shown on the oak picture, but then this is quite limited and a rather fixed perspective.

Let’s not forget that a living network does not stay still. It is built upon a combination of opportunities and mere coincidence. Such complexity makes it therefore impossible to predict the next pattern at time t or t+1. This is where brainstorming comes in as an ultimate solution for facilitating network knowledge.

COMPLEX: lines and points are interconnected, it is extremely difficult to find the common thread, to undo the ball of wool due to the various and diverse interconnections.

BRAINSTORMING 3.0

All experts in collective intelligence and collective genius agree that the intelligence of the group is greater than the sum of all its members’ individual intelligences. Any kind of collaborative meeting whose purpose is to solve a problem through group intelligence illustrates a knowledge network with perfection. Leveraging on it is key to stimulate new ideas and to think in new directions. Here is an overview of the different formats.

- First, let’s consider a group of participants who share knowledge with a note-taker person. We then have a knowledge tank (the note) and a knowledge ensemble (the group). But there is a time gap between oral exchanges and their writing down as notes on paper. The creative drive of the group is constantly stopped as the participants need to wait for the note taker to finish. To make things worse the note taker himself cannot actively take part in the knowledge exchange. All this weakens the group momentum and therefore the collective efficiency.

- Another option is to have a “guide” host*** to facilitate the exchange and to take notes, which will generate the “living” network thanks to real time exchange with the moderator. However the knowledge tank, although improved, remains sequential as it still involves notes taking.
“(...)the intelligence of the group is greater than the sum of all its members’ individual intelligences.”

In the case of a brainstorming 3.0, real time is enabled by Cloud storage: all participants are writing on the same document at the same time. We then have a living network, a guide facilitator and a living knowledge base. This kind of knowledge network is highly effective as it gathers in real time the contributions of the participants, the guide and the tank!

The ability to co-write on the same document in real time shortens the network lines and gets the participants’“neural network” closer together. The response time of each participant and the time it takes to develop the collective work has been so shortened that imagination has now plenty of room to enter the workshop. Participants are in total divergence and start to improvise.

Improvisation improves the quality of deliverables and sought-after intelligence as long as facilitation is available.

* “The octopus planet”, La Corogne Aquarium, 2012
** “You can’t connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backward. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future.”, Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement adress, 2005
*** As Issac Asimov once said «a good collective thinking group needs a guide»