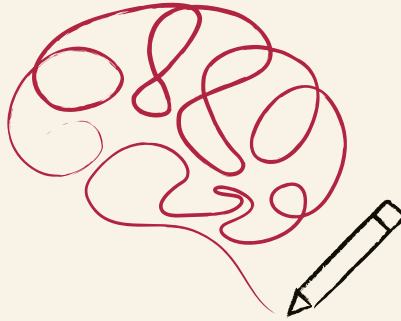


“An essential guide to help leaders tap their organization’s full potential.”

Daniel H. Pink, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author



Collective Intelligence

How to build a business that's smarter than you

Jennifer Sundberg & Pippa Begg



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What's this
book about
and why
should you
read it?

This book for leaders isn't about leaders, leading or even leadership. It won't make you smarter, because you're already smart. You don't need that.

This book is about how you can get *everyone* in your business to think better – not by doing the thinking for them, but by equipping them with the right tools and helping them form new habits. It's about building a collective intelligence that is greater than the sum of its intellectual parts, including yours.

Why? Because brains are why we employ humans and not robots, and we're wasting an awful lot of brainpower by not using them. As long as there is thinking that only humans can and should do, it's down to leaders like you to help them do it better.

Collective intelligence – building a business that's smarter than its CEO – is what powers the most enduringly successful businesses. It helps businesses to conquer the world and is the secret to staying nimble at scale. In this book we'll show you why it works and how to do it.

We can do that because we've seen inside businesses in a way that others haven't, and we've seen how smart businesses get built.

Where the work of most consultants stops at the boardroom door, the nature of our work at Board Intelligence over the past 15 years has put us squarely in the room. In the furnace of the world's most demanding boardrooms, we developed a playbook for helping leaders,

from Fortune 500s to government departments, to make smarter, faster decisions.

Over time, we realised those board-level decisions were the tip of the iceberg. That for every decision made in the boardroom, many more were taken outside of it. All the more so in the most successful businesses, where the centre of gravity for decision-making was much closer to the front line. And where everyone – from the boardroom to the shop floor – was given the tools, skills, and confidence to use their brains and take decisions.

Since then, it's been our mission to help our clients (3,000 and counting) to tap into their collective intelligence, giving them the playbook to unleash the combined thinking power of their people at every level.

This book is our attempt to share what we've learned along the way, so others can do it too. We'll show you how badly run businesses make smart people act dumb and take you inside companies that are systematically designed for everyone to think well.

Most importantly, we'll show you how to move from the first group to the second, transforming how your business thinks, communicates, and gets things done by creating the conditions for people to use their brains and apply them where it matters most.

And yes, that part will require some leadership. Get it right, and it may well be the smartest thing you ever did.

Upside-down

How do you grow big and stay nimble?

“Why am I here?”

It wasn't as glamorous as I (Jen) had imagined it would be.

In the movies, the boardroom of a multibillion-dollar company like this one would be perched at the top of a skyscraper, looking down through huge windows on the city and the ant-like people below. A huge table, so shiny with polish you could see your reflection in it, would fill the room.

This room had no particular outlook, just the dirty grey stone of the buildings opposite. But as the directors filed in, in their sharply tailored suits, it felt like a seat of power – a room in which hugely important decisions would be thrashed out by hotshot business leaders at the top of their game.

To this day, it's hard to explain why I was there. I wasn't a member of the board, but a consultant who'd been working with the CEO for a few months. I think he was trying to be helpful, exposing me to the inner workings of a big company boardroom to help my career. He was right; a few months later I'd meet my future business partner Pippa and together we'd pivot my consultancy business to tackle what I saw that day.

But for now, I took my seat at the table and watched, grateful for the opportunity to observe what really went on in rooms like this one. The chair, a tall man with broad shoulders, called the room to order and the

meeting began. At the table was a Cambridge University technology professor who advised the British government. Sat beside him was a former ambassador, an American high-growth guru, and a handful of British industrialists. Then there were the senior executives and me.

The business had just missed out on a mega-deal and everyone around that table knew it was going to hurt. The loss had opened up a gaping hole in their plans which needed to be filled urgently. The problem was that their core market was showing the early signs of decline and it wasn't obvious where this much-needed revenue would come from. The board needed to make its next move. And fast.

This was the stuff business school case studies were made of, and I was eager to see what the board would come up with. But, as the minutes ticked by, it became clear that I wouldn't find out that day. Because over the next four hours, nothing much happened.

The directors turned over the first page of the stack of papers in front of them – a great brick of a document, packed full of presentations and reports with every imaginable cut of operational performance data – and worked their way through it.

The big gnarly issue went untouched. As the meeting drew to a close, nobody was any the wiser as to how to solve it. And their next chance to discuss it would be at the next board meeting, scheduled for a month's time.

Later that day, as we took a cab to another meeting, the CEO gave me a frank assessment of the board meeting I'd just observed. "I've been a board member for two decades now and I've seen the same thing happen time and again. You take a group of intelligent, strategic thinkers with bucket loads of highly relevant experience, plunk them in a room together and then watch as something goes horribly wrong."

Over the next few months, the business's share price would tumble and the company would shed 50% of its workforce. A 150-year-old business would find itself in terminal decline, eventually being broken up and sold off in parts.

While there's no doubt this caused pain to everyone involved, businesses go bust all the time. At the time, the financial crisis was gathering steam and big businesses were going to the wall every day. So why does this business's demise play such a significant role in our story?

Because it got me thinking about why it happens and the role boards play in it.

I had some sympathy for the growing argument that boards were to blame. At the time, the stories coming out of the banks suggested directors were either asleep at the wheel or just plain bad.

But, having met this particular board, I knew it wasn't that simple. These weren't inept, uncaring or evil people. Were boards being set up to fail?

In any other walk of life, we take our superstars and enable them to the hilt. The best racing drivers get the best cars. The best jockeys get the best horses. In contrast, these directors were locked in a dingy room for four hours once a month and expected to see what no one else could.

I didn't know what tools they needed, but I was motivated to find out.

Across town, I (Pippa) had just quit my job. After a few years working at HM Treasury and in asset management, I'd been tempted into the glamorous world of hedge funds. With an office overlooking the twinkling lights of Sloane Square and dinners at Annabel's, I was looking forward to the cut and thrust of a high-octane business.

It didn't take long for the sheen to come off. All around me were the signs of poisonous, out of control, hubris and a dangerous lack of governance and controls. It drove behaviour that I couldn't stand and saw no hope of fixing.

So I did the only thing I could, and quit. Disenchanted with the world of finance, I spotted an advert Jen had posted on our old university's careers board and went to meet her.

As Jen described her experience of the boardroom to me, it sounded familiar. An unusual quirk of my time

in asset management was that, by my mid-20s, I'd sat in more than my fair share of board meetings, having attended the quarterly board meetings of the funds we managed. I'd witnessed the same problem there. Groups of smart, experienced, sensible people who seemed unable to get stuck in when they really needed to. And yet, coming out of that hedge fund, I now knew better than anyone the dangers of unchecked power and weak governance.

Fixing these problems felt important to both of us. So we decided to team up to try and tackle them.

Over the next few years, thanks to a lot of trial and error, we developed a playbook to help boards have better conversations and make faster decisions about the things that matter. We called it the Question Driven Insight Principle, or QDI Principle for short. We built a successful business around it, earning a nickname, 'the board whisperers,' and a client roster we were proud of.

It might come as a surprise then, to find out that this book isn't about how to run a great board meeting or why great boards unlock organizational performance. In fact, it's not about the board at all.

“I don’t need a better board”

We’ve emerged from this experience as cheerleaders, not for boardroom intelligence, but for *collective* intelligence. What we learned was that to be successful, businesses need to think well and act fast at *every* level. To move quickly, to leapfrog the competition, you need your whole organization to have better conversations about the things that matter, not just the board.

Why?

Time and again, we felt we’d ‘fixed’ the board problem – the conversations were more focused, the information more insightful, the directors happier that they were adding more value. But it wasn’t enough. Boards were working at full pelt but they were still slowing their organizations down. There were just too many decisions for them to make. A director once complained to us that his board needed a horizontal agenda to deal with its 20 ‘number one’ priorities.

With such a vast remit that only ever seemed to expand, they had no hope of catching up. The board was a major bottleneck.

This wasn't something you could fix by adding more board meetings to the calendar, or creating more committees. These businesses needed fewer decisions flowing to the board full stop.

The lightbulb moment came when we met Sir John Timpson, chairman and owner of the eponymous UK shoe repair chain. A larger-than-life character with a broad grin and white hair, his business was a major name on the UK high street and he was a high-profile leader.

We'd been invited to pitch to him, and we went in with what we thought was a compelling message: let us help you get more value from your board.

He was kind enough to let us get five slides in before he cut to the chase. "I don't need a better board," he said. "The important decisions in this business aren't made in our boardroom."

It turns out that he was a fervent believer in 'upside-down management' – inverting the hierarchy and putting decision-making power into the hands of those on the shop floor.

As he later told us: "I don't like being told what to do, so there's no reason why anyone else should. Our store staff understand our customers the best, so we've put them in charge. Management is there to support and empower our staff and this rolls up to the board."¹

In this upside-down hierarchy, the role of management was not to control customer-facing colleagues but to help them.

“What [upside-down management] does for our employees is transform their lives by giving them greater control of how they run their own work affairs,” Timpson later explained to *HR Magazine*.² And the results speak for themselves. The 150-year-old business regularly wins ‘best place to work’ and customer service awards, enjoys high staff retention rates, and has grown to over 2,000 stores while the high street has waged its battle with online retail.³

In one sentence, Timpson challenged everything we thought we knew about how companies worked and set us on a new path. From that point onwards, we could see the problem and the opportunity more clearly. Fix the board and you’ll only get so far. Get the whole business thinking well and making smart decisions and you don’t just fix the bottleneck problem – you tap into the insight, experience and intelligence of everyone in the business, helping it go further, faster.

Move fast and break make things

These weren't just the musings of a maverick contrarian who got lucky. Since meeting Timpson, we've discovered that a similar philosophy drives some of the world's most enduringly successful businesses – including many run by superstar CEOs you wouldn't expect to be fans, let alone flagbearers, for running businesses this way.

Take Amazon, for example. A few years ago, we were in the early stages of developing a new software product and got in touch with a former colleague who'd gone on to work at the ecommerce giant. We were hunting for insights that would help us build and successfully launch a technology product. But what we got was a lesson in collective intelligence.

“At Amazon we spend a lot of time writing documents, because it helps you think things through and gives others confidence that you've done so. That builds trust, which helps us move quickly – you don't have to go up the chain on every decision. Deep thinking is a hugely important part of Amazon's entrepreneurialism.”

This was news to us. The popular narrative would suggest their success is all about finding a genius CEO, and then getting out of their way so they can move fast and break things.

But the reality is altogether different, not just at Amazon, but at businesses like Berkshire Hathaway, Apple, Microsoft and Salesforce too.

Steve Jobs didn't invent the iPhone. In fact, he wasn't keen on the mobile market at all.⁴ Thankfully some of his colleagues saw it differently.⁵

And if it had been down to Warren Buffett, one of the world's most famous superstar CEOs, his investment firm Berkshire Hathaway would never have bought Apple stocks. One of his recently-hired lieutenants placed the bet, and it has paid off handsomely for the firm, making it their largest and most successful investment to date.⁶

The most successful CEOs don't hoard power, they see their role as helping others to think well so they can delegate decision making with confidence. And their businesses value slow, deep thinking and rigorous decision making. They know that putting the hard yards in early on helps them move faster in the long run, because they make fewer missteps along the way.

Nobody knows this better than Ann Hiatt, former executive assistant to Jeff Bezos at Amazon and later chief of staff to Marissa Meyer and then Eric Schmidt at Google. After meeting her at a conference where we were both speaking on a panel, I (Jen) couldn't help but ask if what we'd heard was really true. "I think these larger-than-life CEOs are misunderstood when you only see the glorified *Fortune* cover version of them," she told me. "For sure, their confidence and vision are incomparable.

But they also think hard about how to help others to think well. And unquestionably that is why they have been as successful as they are.”

She cited Amazon Prime, the brainchild of a relatively junior engineer, as a perfect example of this in action. “It all came from just a regular employee saying, ‘I think we’re only serving half of our users with our current offering. What about the people who have more money than time?’ That question put us on the path to developing the membership model we now know as Prime, and fulfilling Amazon’s ‘everything store’ vision.”

Collective intelligence

So, it turns out that the best companies systematically empower everyone (not just the CEO) to think well, and are set up to convert that intelligence into action faster than most companies.

This is what we mean by collective intelligence.

It means everyone is using their brains – rigorously and consistently – and acting on the insights that they generate. Because they don't have to keep coming back to senior management, people are able to make decisions with greater speed and closer to the problem, removing those frustrating bottlenecks. Because they make use of everyone's minds, they produce better thinking and make better decisions.

It may be what underpins the famed agility of tech businesses like Apple and Amazon, but it's not just limited to Silicon Valley. From high street retailers like Timpson to mining companies and banks, any business can learn its lessons.

It's been our mission for over a decade to apply and refine these lessons, developing our Question Driven Insight playbook not just in the living laboratory of our own business but with our clients too – businesses with superstar CEOs who turned out to be wrecking balls,

consumer services firms derailed by mis-selling scandals, lumbering giants who just wanted to be more nimble.

What we've learned boils down to two things.

First, intelligence is an applied capability and you can create the conditions to help it flourish. As Charles Darwin – a man who, it's reported, occupied the middle of the IQ distribution curve – put it, “Even people who aren't geniuses can outthink the rest of mankind if they develop certain thinking habits.”

We first witnessed this in the boardroom 15 years ago and have since seen it play out at every level of management across every industry. You can't just throw smart people in a room together and expect them to make magic. But, just as the wrong conditions can stultify smart people, it is also possible to enhance everyone's ability to apply their minds if you can create the right conditions.

Doing so means you can make every decision – big and small – smarter and faster. And the more we practise good thinking, the better we get at it. It's like going to the gym; if we exercise our brains every day, we can eventually take in our stride the things that used to leave us gasping.

Second, you can create the conditions for collective intelligence by equipping everyone in the business with three capabilities: critical thinking, great communication, and a focus on the problems and opportunities that matter most.

Because, without critical thinking, we're starved of the insights and ideas that will take us further, faster. Without great communication, those ideas and insights go nowhere because we can't rally others behind them and compel them to action. If we don't focus all this on a shared view of what matters most, we become busy fools, pulling in different directions.

Creating the conditions for collective intelligence is the smartest thing a leader can do. We need others to help us make sense of our complex, changing, uncertain and ambiguous world, and to meet its challenges with creativity and judgement. We need them to challenge us, so we don't fly too close to the sun. And it simply doesn't work to throw good thinkers at problems and hope for the best.

In this book we'll show you how to put those three elements into action: great thinking, clear communication and focus. We'll show you how it's done in Silicon Valley and elsewhere too, from our own scale-up technology business to airlines and energy companies. Because every company has the potential to build and benefit from collective intelligence – yours included.

We'll start in Part I by showing you how to get everyone in your business doing their best thinking, with a little help from some dehydrated footballers.

Part I

Thinking



**How will Part I help you build
collective intelligence?**

To build collective intelligence we all need to get better at asking questions, the sort that fuel curiosity and critical thinking. In Part I we'll show you how. It all comes down to rituals and rubber ducks.

— BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT —

Chapter 1

Spark and fuel

How do you get everyone thinking?

Game time

Something strange was happening in Gainesville, Florida in the summer of 1965. Every week Dewayne Douglas would stand in front of a crowd of baying onlookers who'd gathered to watch a group of beefy men shrink. We mean this literally: after a couple of hours, some of the men were 18lbs lighter than they were when they arrived.

It wasn't some new spectator dieting fad. The men were college football players at the University of Florida – the Florida Gators – battling it out with rival teams. And Douglas was their assistant coach, a former Gator whose professional playing career had been cut short by injury. When he wasn't coaching, he worked as a security officer at the university's health centre.

One day, after four cups of coffee and as many trips to the restroom, a question struck him as he chewed over their most recent game: Why aren't the players urinating more?

He recalled his own experiences as a player on the field – sweating, shrinking, losing weight and never feeling the need to urinate, no matter how much he drank. He wondered why.

It would have been easy to bat this question away. It was obvious, surely, why players didn't urinate during games – they were sweating so much they had no fluid left.

But Douglas didn't bat it away, and he put the question to his friend at the health centre, kidney specialist Dr Robert Cade, over another coffee. Douglas knew that urination was an important bodily function – expelling waste as well as excess fluid. So why would it grind to a halt on the football field? Surely, in the space of a few hours, at least some of the 30 players would feel the urge. It got the two of them talking and Cade thinking. He mused on whether there might be a connection with another phenomenon accepted as just one of those things, that player performance tails off dramatically during games. He decided to experiment.¹

With careful analysis, Cade and his team of researchers discovered that, as well as losing water, players were losing electrolytes. This was upsetting the body's chemical balance and sending the kidneys into overdrive trying to conserve water and salt in a battle to maintain blood volume.²

All this meant no urination and performances that diminished rapidly as games wore on, not to mention heat stroke and hospitalization when temperatures were high (as they often were in Gainesville).

Of course, the solution wasn't as simple as drinking more. Drinking water made players sluggish and prone to cramp by further diluting electrolytes, and sugary drinks did nothing to replenish salts. So, Cade challenged himself to find an alternative – one that would replace what the body was losing and keep the Gators going for longer.

His first few attempts fell flat. Nobody could stomach his foul-tasting concoction of glucose, sodium and phosphate until Cade's wife suggested adding lemon to mask the flavour. Four dozen lemons later, Cade finally had something he could test.³

It worked a treat, powering the freshmen to a miraculous second-half turnaround in their annual 'Toilet Bowl' game with the Gators B team. The varsity team's coach got wind and ordered a supply for the following day's much-anticipated game with Louisiana State. Cade leapt at the opportunity, borrowing glucose supplies from other labs in the medical school and cleaning out three local grocery stores' lemon supplies to produce 100 litres of the experimental drink.

The rest, as they say, is history. The electrolyte drink proved so effective that the Gators used it in every game for the rest of the season, and then started using it in practice too. Before long it was given a name, Gatorade, in honour of the football team. It went on to become a hugely successful business, now with \$6bn sales in the US alone, and kick-started the sports drink sector.⁴

The story of Gatorade contains all the ingredients of critical thinking. Douglas and Cade's curiosity set off a chain reaction of questions, sparking insights that provided a practical basis for action. Ideas were tested and developed rigorously. Every failure brought the solution nearer. And there wasn't a CEO or Nobel prize-winning scientist in sight.

Millions of people had been watching the same American football games for decades. Hundreds of thousands will have known first-hand that locker room toilets went strangely unvisited during half-time breaks. Tens of thousands had the scientific knowledge to figure it out.

So why didn't any of them ask the questions that made all the difference? Why did Douglas and Cade?

We don't need no education

Questions are the catalyst of intelligence, collective or otherwise. They stimulate our curiosity and creativity, and trigger critical thinking, surfacing insights and ideas that help us solve problems in new and useful ways.

We all start off as prodigious questioners. Research by Harvard shows that children bombard their caregivers with up to 100 questions a day between the ages of two and five, as they try to make sense of the world around them.⁵

But as we get older, something strange happens. As we learn more, we ask less. And by the age of 11 most children have stopped asking questions. Our innate curiosity withers away – and as parents, teachers and employers we are all fully complicit in it.

“There is what I call an answer orientation that permeates education, professional life and society at large,” explains Dr Lani Watson, a research fellow at the University of Oxford whose work focuses on questions and questioning.

Formal education hones our ability to memorize answers, be they simple facts or more sophisticated explanations. Teachers ask children questions – not the other way around – and then reward them for giving the answer they (and the examiner) expect.

Because we're habituated from an early age to value answers, we start to lose the skill of asking good questions. "I've done a lot of work with schools, and I've not met a single teacher who disagrees with the idea that children start off asking questions, go through formal education, and then come out answering them," Watson explains.

An experience recounted in the book *The Hungry Mind* highlights just how back to front this is. In one 9th-grade art lesson, a student raised her hand to ask if there were any places in the world where no one made art. The teacher's response? "Zoe, no questions now, please; it's time for learning."⁶

This continues into adult life. At work, we expect people to show expertise in their area of specialization – to have answers. But by losing their questioning skill, they sacrifice their capacity for original, creative thought.

A test developed in the 1960s by psychologists Dr George Land and Dr Beth Jarman showed this in action. They asked a group of NASA job applicants and a group of 5-year-olds to identify as many different uses for a paperclip as possible. The children wiped the floor with the adults, embracing the power of "what if?" and coming up with all manner of ideas, from a tightrope for ants to a hula hoop for fairies. 98% of them scored at "genius level". In stark contrast, only 2% of the adults achieved this score. Most of them couldn't see past using paperclips to bind papers together.⁷

The decline and fall of photography giant Eastman Kodak shows what dire consequences can follow from this inertia of the imagination. One day in 1975, a group of executives gathered to hear a pitch from one of their employees, an excited young electrical engineer called Steve Sasson. He had with him a device about the size of a toaster – the world’s first self-contained, digital camera.⁸

He started talking about its technical specifications and all the ways that it could be further improved. But the executives soon stopped him. The new camera was too clunky, one of them said. What was the point in releasing a product that would cannibalize their thriving photo film business, another asked. “That’s cute,” he said, paperclipping Sasson’s blueprints together and filing them away, “but don’t tell anyone about it.”

Kodak was in the midst of a golden age, growing ten-fold between 1962 and 1981. Its executives solved the problems that they thought needed solving – making quarterly numbers, incrementally improving products, optimizing supply chain and logistics, engaging their customers.

But had they asked, “What will eventually replace camera film, as camera film once replaced photographic plates?” or “If we don’t sell digital cameras, who will?”, then they would have seen a different set of problems. They might have seen an opportunity. And they might not have shelved Sasson’s prototype so swiftly.

Forty years later, Satya Nadella spotted a similar problem taking root at Microsoft, where he was preparing to step up to the CEO role.

For all its past successes, Microsoft was losing ground. “The tech giant hadn’t had a breakthrough innovation in decades,” reported Stanford University’s Behnam Tabrizi in *Harvard Business Review*.⁹

To Nadella, the root cause was clear: “Our culture had been rigid. Each employee had to prove to everyone that he or she knew it all and was the smartest person in the room”. As a result, the business was being held back by internal power plays and a ‘not invented here’ mentality, and Microsoft increasingly found itself watching from the sidelines as its competitors made huge strides forward.¹⁰

Nadella had inherited what he called a ‘know it all’ culture. To get Microsoft back into the game, he needed to build a ‘learn it all’ culture and turn a company of world-class experts into a company of world-class questioners.

Getting back on the bike

Some people never lose their inquisitiveness and open-mindedness. The late Stephen Hawking once said, “I am just a child who has never grown up. I still keep asking these ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions. Occasionally, I find an answer.”

But that doesn’t mean the rest of us are doomed to be mindless automatons. Just as we learned to give good answers, so can we relearn how to ask good questions. We can get our questioning mojo back.

There are parallels with literacy. “If we were to go 400 years into the past ... about 15% of the population knew how to read,” says educator Sal Khan.¹¹ “And I suspect that if you asked someone who did know how to read, ‘what percentage of the population do you think is even capable of reading?’ they might guess 20 or 30%. Today, we know that close to 100% of the population can read.”

Giving people access to the necessary education and tools changed perceptions of human potential – and opened up a world of new opportunities.

If we apply the same logic to questioning – something we all started our lives knowing how to do – it no longer feels like a superpower for the precious few. It feels like something that’s well within us all.

What if we gave everyone the right tools to ask more and better questions? Perhaps 98% of adults could score as highly in the paperclip test as those 5-year-olds. Perhaps one of your employees could imagine the next big thing, and not get shut down. By helping people rebuild the muscles that atrophied during their education, the remarkable could become the norm.

It's not a miracle cure: asking the right questions doesn't necessarily mean people will find the right answers. But, by equipping as many people as possible with the power of questions, we give ourselves a fighting chance.

So let's find out how.

Enjoyed this sample?

The full book is available to buy at popular bookshops.

For more information visit:

www.collectiveintelligence-book.com



“Sundberg and Begg have produced an essential guide to help leaders tap their organization’s full potential by creating the conditions for critical thinking, clear communication, and nimble execution.”

Daniel H. Pink, #1 New York Times bestselling author of *The Power of Regret*, *Drive*, and *To Sell is Human*

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