

*An Executive
Book Summary*

King Arthur's Round Table

How Collaborative Conversations

Create Smart Organizations

By

David Perkins

**“Organizations
are made of
conversations.”**

-Ernesto Gore

p. 17

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Overview

David Perkins' book, "King Arthur's Round Table: How Collaborative Conversations Create Smart Organizations" is a how-to book for leaders on establishing and sustaining effective communication skills for establishing a positive and more productive work environment. To illustrate his point, Perkins uses the classic Arthurian tale as an example of a productive organization that uses dynamic communication skills to further Camelot's power.

More specifically, Perkins uses the famed Round Table of Arthur's court as a metaphor for a collective

community. In that community, all sit together as equals to share and solve for the benefit and advancement of the organization.

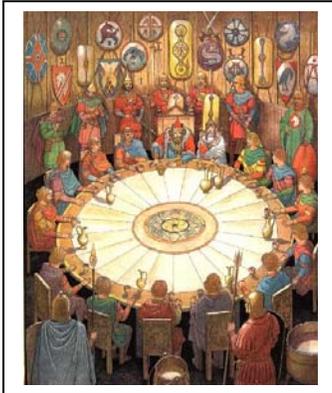
Perkins states that how smart an organization is will be reflected by the type and quality of the conversations employees have with one another. He calls this *organizational intelligence*.

Perkins then asks, "What is Organizational Intelligence, why is it so hard to come by; and how do we get more of it?" This truly is the grail of this book's quest.

Perkins, D. (2003). *King Arthur's round table: How collaborative conversations create smart organizations*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Chapter 1-King Arthur's Dream

A Smarter Table



Perkins starts his book by arguing that King Arthur was a social theorist. He believes that Arthur wanted a collective enterprise in which all its members were equals. Thus he created the famed "Round Table" whose design fostered a feeling of equality between all its members. Unlike a traditional long rectangular table that was predicated by position by proximity to the king, the round table created equal distances between its members, with no position greater than any other.

The design of the table permitted Arthur to establish a community of peers who could converse as equals. Thus everyone sitting at the table felt that they were contributing to the success of the kingdom.

Perkins uses the round table as a metaphor for effective communication for an organization. Round tables serve people well, symbolically and functionally, when they gather together in a mutual spirit to solve a problem or construct a vision.

Putting Our Heads Together

Perkins begins by talking about the "Lawnmower Paradox", which states that pooling physical effort is easier than pooling mental effort. The axiom "Many hands make for light work" could be used here. But as is often the case, the more people working on a problem, the harder arriving at a solution becomes. He believes that one hurdle impeding the achievement of a successful Organizational Intelligence is this paradox.

The round table, figuratively and realistically, makes pooling mental effort easier. As Perkins states, "A round table makes it a little easier to pool mental effort.

A round table makes a group a little more intelligent."

As social species most of what we do requires the pooling of our efforts so that we can be successful, especially in our ever-changing world. Perkins believes that this interactive, collective, group experience (organizational intelligence) is extremely important.

Perkins aim for this book is to look hard at the lawnmower paradox and offer a theoretical and practical account of organizational intelligence.

From Camelot to Reality

Perkins notes that sometimes the ideals overreach reality. Most times a group doesn't even function as intelligently as its average member. The group is unable to communicate, problem solve, and decide in a

positive and effective manner.

Perkins believes that an organization's intelligence is reflected by the types of conversations that members have with one another.

*The Lawnmower
Paradox: Pooling
physical effort is easy;
pooling mental effort is
usually rather hard.*

Chapter 2-Organizations Are Made of Conversations

How Round is Your Table?

The statement, "How round is your table?" is a metaphor for the quality of conversations of an organization. Perkins states that there are 2 types of interactions: *progressive* and *regressive*. Progressive interactions are defined as process-smart and people-smart, while regressive interactions are considered to be the opposite.

Progressive interactions are full of thoughtful conversations, creative explorations, and sound decisions. Conversely, regressive interactions tend to be narrow, confusing, and cautious; key information isn't being communicated or is being lost.

When being progressive there is a great amount of *knowledge processing* that occurs. Knowledge processing involves rich, meaningful interactions that foster greater amounts of authentic communication that

allow for better choices and decisions. If one is regressive in his or her interactions there is a decrease in good knowledge processing.

Perkins goes on to say that everyone, whether they have a progressive or regressive style, uses *symbolic conduct*. That is to say that what one says and does at any given moment has a result. If one has progressive tendencies, the result is that others notice the positive consequence of the interaction. Perkins states that it is through symbolic conduct that the culture of a group is expressed and reinforced.

To review, progressive interactions involve effective knowledge processing and positive symbolic conduct, while regressive interactions involve poor knowledge processing and negative symbolic conduct.

The Usual Suspects

Using two different scenarios, Perkins shows how one example organization is progressive while another is regressive. The progressive organization uses participative decision-making. This allows for better knowledge processing and symbolic conduct. The regressive organization is based on an autocratic decision-making process that does not yield a high knowledge processing return nor a very effective symbolic conduct.

Perkins calls participative and autocratic decision-making styles the *Archetypes of Interaction*. These interactions are the "usual suspects" of collective life. One or the other is usually found in most organizations.

Perkins goes on to show how the Archetypes of Interactions work with real world events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis and the following Six Day War that involved Israel and Egypt. By using progressive strategies that involved effective communication both events were defused before a catastrophe could occur. Perkins goes on to say that, "The real point and promise of progressive archetypes is not that they always serve better, but that they serve better much more often than people recognize or act upon.

Process Smart:
The exchanging of progressive interactions that foster good decisions and solutions.

People Smart:
The progressive interactions that foster a cohesive group.

Symbolic Conduct: *The side messages sent by our words and behaviour.*

Archetype of Interaction:
The recognizable pattern of interactions that occur in different settings.

*"Feedback is a true
hotspot of intelligence
in groups,
organizations, and
committees."
Pg. 40*

*The Three Steps of
Communicative
Feedback*

1. *Clarify (Ask questions to understand)*
2. *Value (Express specifically what you like about the idea)*
3. *Concerns or Suggestions (State your puzzles coupled with suggestions)*

*"How well feedback
is depends on who's
doing the feeding
and who's doing the
eating."
p. 62*

Chapter 3-Yakety Yak and Feedback

If we are to grow as people, or organizations for that matter, we need feedback in order to prosper. As Perkins points out, feedback is fundamental to performance and learning in individual and group settings.

The advantage of feedback is that it allows for interaction, learning, and correction. Unfortunately there is also a drawback to feedback. Sometimes it is uninvited or poorly presented and can be taken the wrong way creating a negative experience.

Three Faces of Feedback

Perkins identifies 3 types of feedback:

1. **Negative:** Telling people what's wrong without offering solutions. Usually unspecific in detail.
2. **Conciliatory:** Being positive, vague, and avoiding criticism.
3. **Communicative:** Giving specific positive as well as negative feedback. It is specific feedback with possible solutions.

Each archetype of feedback has its place and time, meaning they all have positive and negative aspects.

Even though each archetype of feedback has its place and time, Communicative Feedback is the most progressive and therefore the most effective and authentic. Conciliatory is the most regressive style of feedback because usually no information is actually given and people can be misled.

Who to Whom

As mentioned before, there is a time and a place for feedback and Perkins states it can be a very precarious issue. Even though Communicative Feedback is a very progressive means of communication, if the feedback is unwarranted or uninvited problems will ensue and quickly become regressive. We must tread lightly and use feedback when it is appropriate.

Authority Relationships: People in authority have the right to give feedback while those in subordinate positions do not.

Positives and Negatives of Feedback

1. **Negative:** +communicates what's wrong
-fails to clarify
2. **Conciliatory:** + usually pleasant
- communicates virtually no information
3. **Communicative:** +clarifies idea
-consumes more time and effort

Exchange Relationships: Trading/purchasing a product gives the right to give feedback

Stakeholder Relationships: Have the right to give feedback if you have a stake.

Friendship/Colleague: These relationships are the most complex and require tact and timing.

Requesting Feedback: The right to give feedback when someone is asking for it.

Chapter 4-The Difficulties of Being One Minded

What is Intelligence?

When Perkins begins his quest to define what organizational intelligence is to the reader, he first sets out to define individual intelligence.

Individual intelligence, according to Perkins, can be defined in two ways, both of which involve knowledge processing.

1. Intelligence is a matter of knowing what to do when you don't know what to do.
2. Intelligence is the somewhat general capability for and tendency toward complex adaptive knowledge processing in response to or in quest of novelty.

Perkins states that knowledge processing is the key component to individual intelligence as well as organizational intelligence. Thus Organizational Intelligence is a combination of both definitions.

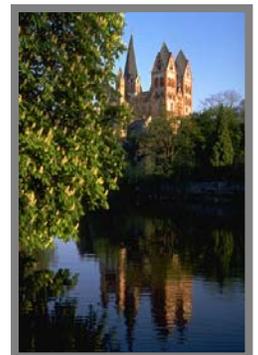
Six Factors Causing Failure of Organizational Intelligence

1. 5 Brain Backlash: Too many voices, making decision-making unproductive and complicated.
2. Cognitive Oversimplification: It is human nature to simplify things; unfortunately it can sometimes hurt decision-making.
3. Emotional Simplification: Much like above, but substituting emotions.
4. Regression in the Face of Stress: When faced with stress we sometimes revert to regressive behaviour.
5. The Domino Effect: The regressive behaviour of one person sometimes tips the behaviour of another.
6. The Power Advantage: Power figures sometimes take advantage of regressive interactions.

"For a group to display intelligence in a sustained way, the members have to value their exchanges and stick together to keep making them, and this depends on positive symbolic conduct...and collaboration."

p. 74

As Perkins states in Chapter 1, the fundamental question of the book is, "What is Organizational Intelligence, why is it hard to come by, and how do we get more of it?" Now we know what Organizational Intelligence is, but by looking at some of the pitfalls we also know why it is so hard to come by. By recognizing the regressive behaviours, an authentic and accountable leader can begin to overcome these obstacles and follow King Arthur's tradition, slaying the modern dragons of organization.





Four Forms of Leadership

Chapter 5-From Lordship to Leadership

Perkins believes there are two types of leaders, *facilitators* and *inhibitors*. The main differences between the two lay in their beliefs. The facilitator believes that the organization is there to empower and serve others, while the inhibitor believes that the employees are there to serve the organization. The facilitator is progressive and the inhibitor is regressive.

Perkins identifies four archetypes of leadership. Each archetype is in sharp contrast with the others, although leaders often combine them. Here are the four archetypes with their positives and negatives.

1. Answer-Centered Leadership: This leader declares what's to be done and why.
 - + Informing and guiding the group with experience and knowledge.
 - Creates little incentive for group members to develop own knowledge processing.
2. Vision-Centered Leadership: This leader offers a strong energizing vision for the organization and offers great personal commitment.
 - + Provides vision for the organization, fosters trust in leader's commitment.
 - May create dependency relationship, excludes possibilities that are not consonant with vision.
3. Inquiry-Centered Leadership: This leader fosters inquiry at various levels through questions, facilitation, and the establishment organizational structures that support inquiry.
 - + Facilitates groups collective knowledge.
 - Risks underutilizing own knowledge and experience.
4. Leadership by Leaving Alone: This leader leaves people alone to find their way and learn for themselves.
 - + Makes room for others to be problem solvers.
 - Does nothing to help the challenges of collective knowledge processing.

Of the four archetypes of leadership, the Inquiry-Centered Style is the most progressive. The inquiry model builds organizational intelligence, relating in ways that model and promote group problem solving.

It is important to note that the leader who uses the inquiry style also uses the remaining archetypes when needed. The inquiry leader is flexible and knows when to change styles.

The Leadership

Trap:

The smarter and more experienced the leader, the more alluring answer-centered and vision-centered leadership becomes, despite their less progressive and interactive style.

Chapter 6-Ants, Weather, and Organizational Intelligence

Perkins starts Chapter 6 with the statement, “The perspective of this entire book can be summed up in one sentence: *‘Human organizational intelligence is an emergent consequence of the balance of progressive archetypes of interaction over regressive archetypes of interaction within a well-developed contact architecture.’*” What is meant by this is that cognition in a collective is distributed in many different ways. When people interact progressively more intelligent group behaviour emerges and this is the essence of organizational intelligence.

A Round Table Model of Organizational Intelligence

The following is a recap of the Organizational Theory drawing on ideas from the previous chapters:

1. Organizations are conversations
2. Hot spots of interaction
2. Knowledge processing
3. Symbolic conduct
4. Archetypes of interaction
5. Progressive vs. regressive
6. Like breeds like
7. Regressive dominates progressive
8. Contact architecture
9. Intelligent as emergent
10. Progressive within reach

“The intelligent behaviour of a collective resides in no one thing, because too much is going, but rather is the emergent consequence of the many knowledge transactions that make up the minutes, hours, and days of group life.”

p. 132

Chapter 7-Collaboration Not Collaboration

Perkins coins the term *collaboration*, which means that sometimes when we work with others we tend to *blab* instead of *collaborate*. Collaboration is a regressive interaction that results in:

1. Brownian Motion: conversation bounces around by individual comments and without a topic focus.
2. Downspiraling: much like Brownian, but the conversation takes a negative spin and gets stuck.

3. Groupthink: where people think too much alike, which results in “blindness”.

To avoid collaboration the leader needs to be progressive and become a facilitator. When the leader becomes a facilitator he or she can “steer” the conversation to problem-solving interactions.

The facilitator must be wary of the situation, deciding if the mission lends itself to sharing. If not the collaboration will fail.

When problem-solving, the facilitator must

decide if the situation needs to be *talked through* (highly interactive conversation), *be entrusted* (entrusting one person/small group to solve for the large group), *divided-up* (dividing up jigsaw style), or use *initial take* (one person/group is to generate a “first draft” to get the conversation started for the entire group).

For the facilitator to be successful at generating collaboration they must ensure that everyone becomes a responsible collaborative citizen.

Chapter 8-Creative Conflict, Tragic Trust



Three Ways of Settling Conflict

When we are working with others conflict is inevitable. Thus, using the “Round-table Model of Organizational Intelligence” encourages us to examine the archetypes of conflict resolution.

1. Consensus Resolution: conflict is resolved by agreement of the group.
2. Civil Resolution: conflict is resolved through a governance structure (i.e. A boss, a vote, a jury, etc.)
3. Power Resolution: conflict is resolved through one’s wielding of personal or administrative power.

Progressive and Regressive Conflict Resolutions

Because of its solitary nature, Power Resolution is considered to be the most regressive form of conflict resolution of the three.

Consensus and Civil Resolution are both progressive means of problem solving because of their collective nature.

This chapter discusses the virtues and vices of trust and conflict. Perkins notes that most people believe that trust is a positive concept while conflict is a negative one. However as Perkins states there can be too much trust and too little conflict.

Conflict occurs when people who are working together and are communicating press for different

answers about something that calls for resolution. Thus when we are working together conflict is inevitable.

Perkins goes on to describe the interplay between trust and conflict and how they can work together. This is called Creative Conflict. Creative Conflict involves high levels of trust between people or systems so that problem solving can occur.

Trust is the fiber of progressive conflict.

p. 199

How Trust Works

Trust is one of the building blocks of cohesive organizations, but it is a fragile one. Perkins reveals the logic of trust

- Practicality of trust: we only trust certain people.
- What we trust: we only trust what is highly contextual.
- Two-sides of trust: we rely on judgments of the capability and the commitment of an individual.
- When we trust: we trust when we infer that the required commitment and capability are there.
- When trust is violated: we feel disappointed that the capability and commitment were not present.

The Three Tenets of Trust

1. Recognize that trust is fragile.
2. Remember that trust concerns not only the commitment but also the capability of what’s trusted.
3. Foster reflective trust.

*Don't trust
your trust!
Cultivate
reflective trust.*

p. 190

Chapter 9-Climbing Toward Camelot

As Perkins states, “The Round Table Model analyzes how progressive interactions between people build organizational intelligence and encourages us to step in that direction by giving communicative feedback, exercising inquiry-centered leadership, avoiding collaboration, cultivating trust in a common vision and civil process. A brighter future awaits groups, teams, organizations, and communities, a future with round-table interactions that foster collectives smarter in both the cognitive and humanistic senses.”

Idea-Action Gap:

*The wide and persistent gulf
between good principles and
practical actions displayed by
individuals and organizations*

This chapter is about bridging the Idea-Action Gap to foster progressive rather than regressive interactions, and build better organizations.

Perkins believes that too many books are based on “explanation theories” that tell “what” something is. To be progressive, Perkins wrote a book based on “action theories” which tells how to do something. This is his way of bridging the Idea-Action Gap.

The Road to hell is paved with good intention, but the road to Camelot is paved with good, smart intentions.

p. 240

Book Summary

Perkins has written a comprehensive book about how positive interactions with those around us are the capstone to a positive, authentic, and accountable organization. He believes that “it’s not ideas, but people with ideas that make things happen (Perkins, pg.240).” It was King Arthur’s unconventional idea to sit his knights at a round table to foster a feeling of egalitarianism. This created the idea of collaboration and made for a smarter organization. Perkins has taken this metaphor and made it his own to develop the idea of a better, smarter organization for the new millennium based on an old idea.