

Leaders as Authors: Polarized Crowds vs. Community Clusters

...by Paul Terry

In previous columns on leadership, I've written about management theory that views "knowledge power" over "position power" as a way to get things done with and through others. Francis Bacon's notion that knowledge is power emanated from a leading statesman considered the father of the scientific method. He believed a more systematic application of knowledge would better remedy the social ills of his time. But Bacon's idea was also that of an 18th century reformation leader committed to religious freedom and the development of a common system (Napoleonic Code) intended to make laws understood by everyone, not just the ruling class.

Fast forward to 2014 and consider a Pew Research Center¹ report about the Internet's influence on how we pursue and apply knowledge. A mapping of Twitter networks shows we are becoming increasingly polarized, tending to surround ourselves with people who generally think alike. These "polarized crowds" are not debating issues, they're ignoring one another. In contrast, "community clusters" or "tight crowds" foster diverse views and mutual support. As a leader, which approach to networking do you work to advance?

As much as things have changed since Bacon's time, much remains the same in our quest for a more utopian state. In his brilliant book *Kinds of Power*, James Hillman reflects on why "people

today feel disempowered" in their quest for a better life and better workplaces. He argues that an understanding of power begins with a "heartfelt appreciation of ideas in and for themselves." Hillman notes that "ideas determine our goals of action, our styles of art, our values of character." Too often power comes down to "simplistic ideas of control, authority, leadership and prestige" but when we more deeply understand the influence of ideas we can expect "critical discernment of media distortions and intelligent improvement in national debates." Power then, in both Hillman's and Bacon's formulations, is liberating and disciplined. We have it when we can distinguish dysfunctional, "flimsy and cheap ideas" from ideas that "empower the spirit and open its eyes to envisioning possibilities."

Evaluating Ideas at the End of the Fourth Estate

We, the people, are referred to as "the third estate." The first and second estates of religion and politics were thought to exert such authority on we, the people, that a fourth estate was needed. Journalists were the truth tellers who protected the third estate by disclosing facts and sharing knowledge widely. But this fourth estate is under siege in the Internet era. Google "blogging vs. journalism" and you will surface nearly 2 million

leadership in health promotion



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The etymology of author is, in Latin, to originate or promote. More literally, an author is someone who "causes to grow." In Middle English an author is a person who invents or causes something.



hits from writers of all ilk. Many are lamenting the dearth of facts, the loss of credibility, and the surplus of pontificators where others are celebrating the democratization of ideas and the speed news can travel.

Francis Bacon exercised his leadership at a time when information was a scarcity and knowledge was elitist. Wellness professionals today are exerting leadership in an era of unfettered information, and knowledge comes with a buyer beware label. Many bloggers lack the ethos of journalism and, in wellness, a few even lack common decency. In a *New York Times* article, "Dealing with Digital Cruelty,"

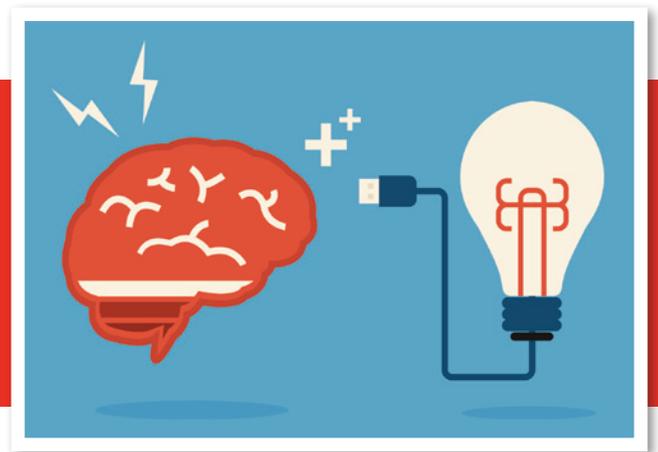
Stephanie Rosenbloom presented a thesis that even though there are no holds barred for what she describes as the “brutal tweets by trolls,” we readers still have important choices. We can ignore them. When I have personally been the subject of some loutish blogger diatribes, I’m mindful that some things you simply don’t dignify with a response. The opportunity cost is too high. Time spent reacting to a frivolous blogger claim is time away from innovating and improving on behalf of the field. Nearly every professional I know has taken the same approach and, gladly, we work in the wellness field where trolls are still anomalous. In fields like politics

and writers you disagree with but should visit now and then in the bazaar of diverse views:

- First, if a writer is challenging science, do they actually have a science background? I will usually look in *PubMed* for the publishing record of someone arguing a health science point. If you type in the names of leaders most widely recognized in worksite health promotion, for example, you will find they’ve published 50-200 research articles. When I check *PubMed* for studies by a couple of the more vociferous wellness bloggers, they are nowhere to be found.

- The third test is more subjective than those above, but I find it to be the most effective. I don’t need to do any fact checking or review a writer’s work to assess whether to hang near their booth in the bazaar. Instead, I evaluate the tone and style of a message and ask: “What are they for?” Writers who polarize do so foremost by arguing against something. But “creative disruption” — something every field needs — must actually have a creative component to be of use in furthering our work. That means the writer is focused on advancing

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or religion, blogger rancor flows like rapids and it’s impossible not to get swept into one of the fields the Pew study describes.

Building a Community Cluster

The Pew report likens a “community cluster” of communicators to a bazaar where there is a diversity of views but also multiple centers of activity. How do we differentiate writers who are polarizing and isolationist from those who foster positive community change? I like Rosenbloom’s challenge to let our detractors be our “gurus.” It’s an approach that looks for the kernel of truth in ideas that you disagree with. I suggest 3 simple tests for distinguishing between trolls who should be ignored

- A research record, of course, is just 1 source of credibility. Many, if not most, ideas that advance our field have come from practitioners. So, similar to the first test, if a writer is arguing for a “new approach” or, more commonly, arguing against a “traditional approach” I suggest looking for evidence that they have actually developed, tested, and delivered on their idea. Good leaders rarely defend the status quo, given continuous improvement is part of their DNA. Still, they do routinely ask, “Do you have a better idea?” And as has been our mantra at StayWell, the acid test of any innovation is proof that it works at improving population health. It’s a pretty high bar but one that readily separates hype from substance.

something new, not merely bent on tearing something down they view as traditional.

Critical writing that is devoid of a better idea is flimsy and cruel. Being for something is what it takes to “empower the spirit” and cause us to grow. 🚀

References

- 1 Smith M, Rainie L, Shneiderman B, Himelboim I, Pew Research: Internet Project. Mapping Twitter Topic Networks: From Polarized Crowds to Community Clusters. February 20, 2014; www.pewinternet.org/2014/02/20/mapping-twitter-topic-networks-from-polarized-crowds-to-community-clusters/ (accessed September 30, 2014).