

# What Lies at the Source of Phenomenal Results?

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Dawna Jones, host of the Evolutionary Provocateur podcast on <http://Management-Issues.com> interviewed Anne Murray Allen as we continue to explore the scientific and spiritual roots of well-being, high performing communities and organizations, and global sustainability.

## **An Interview with Anne Murray Allen**

Anne Murray Allen is currently the Director for the Executive Development Center at Willamette University's Atkinson Graduate School of Management. In this role Anne is responsible for developing non-degree certificate programs in business and public management essentials, sustainability, and industry-specific training. Her personal areas of interest and research are in understanding how healthy, performance-based organizations are built and sustained. These 'social networks of collaboration' are a key ingredient for organizations and communities to move into the future taking effective action in building a sustainable future.

Anne retired from Hewlett-Packard Company in 2005, having served in a variety of management and executive positions over a 16 year period. These included leading company-wide Knowledge and Intranet Management, strategic planning (at the division and at the corporate level), culture integration for the Compaq/HP merger, IT for the Imaging and Printing Group, production management for scanners and Inkjet cartridges. While still at HP, Anne co-authored an article with Dennis Sandow entitled, "The Nature of Social Collaboration" published in *Reflections Journal*, May 2005.

Anne holds an undergraduate degree in psychology from Manhattanville College and an MBA from the University of Denver.

## **Though it sounds obvious, why is this question so important?**

This is the question of the moment right now. What we are seeing is that work is getting more and more stressful, more and more difficult in companies, communities and organizations sometimes it's hard to feel like we are getting any results let alone phenomenal results.

What I have learned through my own experiences in organizations working with incredible groups of people is that you have phenomenal results and sustain them without the effort that most people think it would take. So I think that with all of the challenges we are facing in terms of the economy, global challenges we are working on across border as well as with organizations. It is time to say we do need phenomenal results because things aren't going the direction we want them to.

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## What is the fallacy of leadership?

The first fallacy is that we continue to think of leadership as being about position. When I am in a position to have people who I control or who report to me then it is all about leadership. When we think about who is the leader people default to who is in charge. The second fallacy is that it is so focused on individuals; it is all about a person, that to get things to move forward it takes these great individuals in order to move it forward.

You might wonder then, what is the right answer? What I have learned from working in organization where we had truly phenomenal results day after day after day is that leadership does not come from position; it comes from a place of contribution. It can come from anywhere in the organization. It is based on who is in the position to see what no one else can see, to make the contribution that everyone can get behind and support.

It has been my experience from working in organizations for over thirty years that it is in our nature to be motivated by two things: 1) we all want to make a big contribution, not just a contribution but one that is significant. It is what drives us in terms of purpose, 2) we all want to belong. We are social and emotional beings. We know now from what have learned through neural and cognitive science that we are hard wired to be together and collaborate. We don't work alone. We can look in each other's face and often mirror each other. We have neurons that allow us to do that. We know through work and cognitive and living systems science that we live together in language. It is language that allows us to coordinate our actions, to survive and thrive.

So we are back to we all want to make a big contribution and to belong. Those two things go together. The more we are contributing the more we are asked to contribute and the more people see us as belonging so they work really well together.

Where I think a lot of organizations today are, in terms of autopilot, we see the leaders as manager , leader, the person at the top and there is an assumption that they are going to tell people what contribution they can make and direct what they do. When I meet people who are the most frustrated in an organization it is because they either don't see how or feel they are not allowed to make the contribution they know they can make. So what can you do to really unleash that contribution? What kind of environment will enable people to step up, be big and feel supported in that process?

So the fallacy of leadership is that the fact that we think that it is all about individuals takes me back to our social nature. I have been a student of and am passionate about how people work together to achieve extraordinary things. What is impressive is when not just about one leader but all sorts of leaders emerge within an environment conducive to do that. Now you have something powerful and the conditions for phenomenal results.

## **What did you learn from your ground breaking work on social networks when you were with Hewlett Packard?**

We brought in an outside researcher, Dennis Sandow, who still does research in this area, to do social action research. We were growing the ink jet business at a nice clip but things were getting more and more complex. Although we were achieving we were worried that we didn't understand what the secret sauce was that of our performance that we might lose if we kept growing without being mindful of what we had to take care of.

We learned was that we do get things done as a network. That was not earth shattering news. People point to others whenever you have them talk about an accomplishment." I worked with so and so and this person came to me and then I got help from someone else. ..." They constantly reference a team or a network that they achieve things with. We looked at it across the company not just in inkjet. What about a quality control problem for a cartridge that goes in a printer? What about an IT application to being put in place? What about a new product being developed in a specific division?

We studied accomplishment in a variety of places and always found the same pattern. One of the fascinating things we learned was that when we mapped the networks to the organizational chart we saw that the only manager that anyone had in common with was the CEO. HP is a big company. That was a surprising bit of information. It underscored that while we have these vertical organizational charts, they do not display how work gets done in the organization. What they display is some sort of fiduciary responsibility, how reporting results occur and how resources are accounted for but it does not describe how work gets accomplished which is even more networked and horizontal. It cross cuts the entire organization chart. This was a real eye opener and had a lot of ramifications for discussing and learning more about performance.

## **How much of these networks existed within the organization and how much went beyond?**

These networks transcend all boundaries. They are as vast as the mission or shared goals that the people in the network have. Organizational structures like departments, companies, even communities are man-made. They are not natural. They are something we put in place to mentally try to wrap our arms around who is who and how big is this thing that we are trying to coordinate. When you really looked at it people don't let it stop them from getting the information they need and the support they need to get something done. What we saw within HP was that the people in these networks were focused on the goal which had something to do with the customer getting a product out there or solving a problem and even if there was an organizational structure in place like a competing goal or some boundary. If they felt they were doing the right thing for the customer they would find their way around it. They worked around organization boundaries put in place, which were often put in place unwittingly not knowing it was hampering how things got done.

**This reminds me of the expression: Your network is your net worth in that when you move from one place to another you take your social network with you.**

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Yes, you do. That is true throughout an organization. When people move from business to business or department to department those relationships come with them. They may weaken a bit depending on how often you may still call on those relationships in terms of the primary job you have to do but they are always there. This leads to another important thing we learned which was that the networks of high performance networks of collaboration were ones where people were seen as legitimate contributors by each other. Those were the highest performing networks. In those high performing networks people had a palpable sense of social well being. They felt loved and cared for by their co-workers. Love in the sense that they were seen as legitimate contributors. They weren't invisible. They were listened to. They knew that what they said mattered, and that people truly cared about them as individuals. If something was wrong or affecting them negatively their network cared about them and would often make movements to support them or pick up the slack if there was reason to do so to support coworkers while meeting the mission at hand.

It is important to note that people work in networks whether they are high performing or not. In some organizations there is not the sense of high performing networks of collaboration. There is something Dennis Sandow and I named as networks of ambition. That is where people are not seen as equal contributors or maybe some are not seen as valuable or cared for, information might be hoarded by a few, there is hierarchy, 'I am more important than you are. When I call a meeting you come but if you need me I might not be available'... that sort of dynamic. Those networks can get things done, but they rarely if ever will yield phenomenal results. Networks of collaboration are constantly doing the surprising thing. Magical performance can emerge in network of collaboration. Magical is defined as results that exceed the sum of our expectation and explanation, meaning we can try to explain it but it goes even beyond our ability to explain logically. That is the magic of networks of collaboration.

### **What creates shared goals?**

Shared goals can come from several places. That can often be the role of someone in a hierarchical position who has a unique responsibility by the board or principles of the company who say we need people focused in this area. Someone must define the context and purpose for the organization. It might be to deliver a certain product or service or solve a certain problem. Somebody is in that role to help define that and then stay with the group at least long enough to have them develop a shared view of what that means, who are our customers, what is our product exactly and how do we know when it is good enough, but not to constrain them in terms of how to meet that goal. Define here is what it is and provide the constraints, for example, the budget. We can be as creative as possible but only have so much money to spend.

Other times groups come together over a shared goal that might be something that emerges from the group and the power of their relationships. It could happen where someone sees a need in the organization. For example, "We are missing a process here. If we had it, it would make everyone's life easier. "How about we all get together to create this process so it works?" That could emerge within a network work based on a contributor seeing a need.

## **To be an effective steward of a high performing social network what essential qualities must you embody?**

If you are really going to be a person who wants to create, be a part of or encourage networks of performance no matter where you are there are some essential ingredients. If I look back at phenomenal results that I have been a part of over a period of years I ask the question: what was being conserved there. What was it we were doing that we continued to do that really served us well? I use the word conserved over change. We were conserving a process of openness and curiosity. That sounds pretty basic.

If we look around we can see a lot of organizations today where people aren't really open. It is about advocating, jockeying for position and advocating an idea you have and not really being curious about who the other people in the room are and who maybe the customer is. So the people I saw who were most effective at networks of collaboration were always open and always curious; always wanting to hear if someone had a thought on a different way. That didn't mean that they were bogged down in conversation all the time. It simply meant that if someone had a contribution to make there was a listening for that contribution because everyone was always focused on a goal which always had a timetable attached to it. But people were present to each other. That doesn't have to take a lot of time... that is a mindset as much as it is a skill or practice.

Inside of that if you think about being open and curious, you can also see that there is a commitment to personal growth and development. If you think of yourself as an individual as opposed to being a member of a group: Am I really open to always learning? Am I open to being in development? Do I understand that I am a work in progress? For as good as I get at something, that doesn't mean I don't have something new to learn, or some assumptions of mine that might get disturbed in the positive sense." I thought the rule was always this way but actually I just learned something new." An example was when I was working in HP on the cultural integration between HP and Compac during the merge. I had a lot of experience in culture work. I had certain beliefs based on my knowledge about how you can't do this work unless you have certain conditions in place.

It became clear that none of the conditions I thought were important were going to be present. That included free and easy access to the people at the top of the organization; easy access to the entire organization in terms of engaging anyone in the process. None of that was going to be present at the time I had to do this work. And yet by saying "I am not going to get what I thought but I will do what I can with what I have and see what happens" some extraordinary things occurred.

Because I was forced to let go of my surety and certainty, I learned something new. The work did move forward in some unusual and unexpected ways. It is that ability to be curious and open to others; to be present to those who want to make a contribution.

**This will challenge those who need a high level of certainty or who are attached to their view as being right. How have you seen this play out when confronted with the opportunity to be curious?**

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There is a time and a place for certainty. You get trained to come up with a point of view and advocate for it. It is important to get clear about what you see, your experience, and how to be articulate in a fairly succinct way on what that is. I think we have missed the balance. There is also a time and place to open it up and to truly be skillful at listening... tapping into the knowledge and experience of other people.

It would help if more people realized that through cognitive science we know there is no such thing as a shared and objective reality. We all see the world very differently. Of course there is matter; a material world but our actual perception of the world is a closed loop process. The details of what we see, the meaning we put on it, whether we are feeling excited or scared or indifferent is very personal. It is based on emotion and past experience. That is true whether you are at the top of the company or somewhere in the middle.

You are one person with one history with one viewpoint. If ever any one person is calling the shots that has ramifications for everyone it is very dangerous to rely only on your own view of that. It is absolutely critical to know what you do see and to be able to describe it to others but at the same time if the stakes are high and you are dealing with a lot of uncertainty and complexity, tapping into the knowledge and wisdom of others and then creating that shared view which is likely to be much more successful than any one person's view.

### **What direct advice would you give to people in the position of supporting phenomenal results?**

Get curious about how value is being created in your organization right now. I would go out and talk to people that you either observed or heard others talk about as saying, "that person does a really good job or that project was very successful. I'd urge people not to assume that they know what went right. Find out all the people who were involved. Map the network even as an exercise of self-awareness, as one person described what he or she did and then points who was involved and how they helped them. Pay attention to who that was. I think you'll be surprised at how vast the network is.

The question isn't how to create these networks; it is how to support the environment so they can be healthy by removing the barriers that make it hard for them to happen. These are naturally occurring networks in human social systems. So how can we see them, and conserve them.

Look at your own ability to be curious, open and be willing to say, "Hey I can learn from this rather than being the person who always knows. It's a high level summary but a good start for anyone who wants to learn more.