

Unleashing the Power of the Group Mind with Dispersed Teams

Strategic change gets implemented
to the extent that people in the
organization align themselves
to the new strategy.

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Today's business leaders can't afford to move on a new idea or action plan without the creative collaboration of everyone responsible for executing the plan. "Change succeeds best when executives take steps to ensure the buy-in of their whole team." Leaders need new ways to rapidly garner honest feedback from team members, from interdependent teams, and from suppliers and customers so they can find out "if the emperor is wearing no clothes," thus avoiding costly mistakes. All of this must be accomplished very quickly within narrow time constraints. Challenging in the best of circumstances, these tasks are much more difficult to achieve when teams are geographically-dispersed.

To address these challenges, we at GroupMind Solutions have developed a powerful set of online tools and best practices that can be used to unite teams across distance, time, and culture in a common virtual environment. Within this virtual workplace, our consulting practice and collaboration software help leaders unify teams into a cohesive whole by harnessing the power of the group's collective wisdom, or *group mind*. This hidden resource exists within every organization, regardless of size, location, or structure. Successful collaboration depends on a company's ability to tap the group mind which is a hidden resource that exists within every organization, regardless of size, location, or structure.

When we talk about the group mind, we are referring to the expansive pool of ideas that becomes available when a group of people commingle their ideas, questions, perspectives, knowledge and experience in relation to a specific goal or issue. The group mind represents the sum total of everyone's positions and concerns. Accessing the group mind gives people the ability to instantly see everyone's ideas in a contextual framework that supports specific results. All suggestions, comments, votes and survey responses are reported equally and anonymously. When structured to further a company's strategic goals, this rich pool of data forms the basis of meaningful conversations that lead to improved results.

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Through our consulting work with hundreds of companies — from high-tech start-ups to the Fortune 500 — we have grown to appreciate the power of the group mind. When members of a team are given the opportunity to actively influence the thinking of the group as a whole, they gain a unique sense of belonging. Contributing to the group mind engenders feelings of trust, empowerment, and inclusion, and creates a context for the expression of innovative ideas. Harnessing the cumulative wisdom that results is pivotal to achieving strategic alignment and attaining goals, for both co-located and dispersed teams.

The Challenge of Working Virtually

Decision-making is more complex and alignment harder to achieve when people no longer run into each other in the hall or work side by side in a conference room. It is easy for team members who live and work in different locations to become isolated and cut off from each other and from the shared purpose of the group.

We believe dispersed teams need four things to effectively harness the power of the group mind:

1. *a virtual workplace that bridges distance, time and culture*
2. *equal access to information*
3. *the opportunity to have rich, qualitative conversations*
4. *an established set of tools and best practices*

I. A Virtual Workplace that Bridges Distance, Time, and Culture

The first thing a dispersed team needs is a versatile, process-oriented workplace in which they can work together. Such a workplace requires three things: access to the Internet, an integrated toolset that works at every stage of the collaborative decision-making process, and skilled facilitators who can design the virtual space and teach people how to use it.

It is our belief that the Web is the best place to establish this kind of flexible, shared work environment. Conference calls, video conferencing, and e-mail can create temporary bridges, but for an interface to truly eliminate boundaries of distance, time, and culture, it must support asynchronous work. Companies need a comprehensive, easy-to-use, well-organized online environment that puts everyone, regardless of location, time zone or work designation, on the same page.

When teams make the leap to Web-based collaboration, they gain 24-hour-a-day access to a shared workplace they can reach instantaneously from anywhere in the world, at a time that is convenient for them. This enables them to give input when they have the time and the ability to focus, yet their responses—and the responses of all other team members—are held in a shared environment that is accessible to all. Team members have continuous access to data, project updates, individual accountabilities, and statements of need—as well as the capacity to comment on all of the above.

When teams have access to this kind of shared data, in an environment equipped with built-in decision-making tools, it becomes possible for them to do substantive work with people in offices across the state or on the other side of the world. Because people can enter the virtual workspace whenever they want to, a sales manager in Taiwan, a manufacturer in Singapore, and a sales force based in Germany can be active, contributing members of a dispersed cross-disciplinary team without having to change locations or leave their primary work responsibilities.

The Importance of Visual Models

When teams work virtually, it can be extremely difficult for individual team members to maintain an awareness of everyone's role in the value chain. At GroupMind Solutions, we use visual models to help teams stay connected to the larger strategic goals of the organization, as well as their role in accomplishing them. We do this by creating a map that clearly delineates the work to be done as a series of steps leading in a specific direction has proven to be an excellent way to keep teams, both co-located and dispersed, linked to each other and connected to the larger whole. Whether teams are designing strategic plans or implementing them, visual maps provide team members with a sense of direction, helping them see their work as something that is clearly structured toward a desired end result.

At each action point delineated in the model, we use our online software to access the group mind to find out what people are thinking and feeling. Our experience working with a myriad of teams is that people move faster when they are given the opportunity to express the fears and concerns that frequently inhibit top performance.

Bridging Face-to-Face and Virtual Work

For the last eight years, we have used decision-support software to facilitate same time/same place meetings. More recently, we have begun to use web-based software to facilitate same-time/different place meetings and to do asynchronous work. During that time, we have honed our understanding of which navigational systems and processes work best.

With dispersed teams, we often begin with a face-to-face meeting and then transition to virtual work. Using a toolset that works in both settings provides continuity, creates a consistent

container for data, and precludes the need for people to learn a new tool. When companies use the same technology to add value before, during and after face-to-face meetings, productivity increases.

During the planning phase of an offsite, we often use our web-based software to survey participants about what they see as the critical priorities for the meeting. Polling the *group mind* in this way ensures that presenters are on target, addressing the real issues and concerns of the audience. Leaders often tell us that this data has been invaluable to them in preparing for meetings.

At the offsite, we use the same software, which people are already comfortable with, to accelerate the process of posing questions, responding to speakers, holding multiple discussions, and gathering and ranking issues for action. At the conclusion of the offsite, people use our software to give feedback about the meeting.

A virtual workplace is now available to team members when they return to their various places of work around the country or around the world. The same tool now provides members with a way to stay connected and to continue to collaborate on project follow up.

Utilizing the same technology during and after an offsite has the advantage of providing selected team members (both those who attended the offsite and those who didn't) with immediate archiving of all the interactions that occurred during the offsite: the PowerPoint presentations of the speakers, the reactions, decisions and consensus-building that occurred. All of this rich data leads to significant, productive conversations and continues to be available asynchronously after the meeting is over.

2. Equal Access to Information

Far too frequently, dispersed teams arrive at an offsite to do planning, armed with contradictory data and a different sense of what needs to be done. Team members arrive locked in their individual silos, and the agenda is far too full to take the time to help people gain a unified sense of the whole. Yet it is crucial for members of dispersed teams, particularly those from different functions, to share a larger sense of context for their work.

To gain this perspective, everyone involved in the project needs to have equal access to the same contextual materials and documents. An Australian engineer, a German buyer and a Silicon Valley CEO need to be able to quickly access a common pool of data. It is not enough for data to be gathered. It must be organized to support specific goals and it must be shared through a distribution platform that ensures access to everyone.

In creating virtual workspaces for dozens of teams around the world, we have learned the importance of archiving project history so it is clearly organized and easy to find. An effective archival system should contain all contextual information relevant to the project: internal and external white papers, internal data, industry analysis, surveys, results, budgets, and strategic planning documents, as well as conversations relevant to project goals.

When all of this data— and documentation of the process that was used to arrive at the data— is readily available, all members of the team can contribute from a level playing field. As an added bonus, new team members, whether they be in New York, London or Nairobi, only have to click on their web browser to review project history and get up to speed.

Shared Information Leads to Solid Decisions

Too often in organizations, decision-making is based on inferences and assumptions rather than on a common pool of data that is understood by everyone involved in making the decision. When two people begin a conversation about what should happen in an organization and they don't share the same data or have a common framework for interpreting it, it is extremely difficult for them to listen to each other or to reach a consensus about how to proceed.

People often go through life seeking confirmation of their pre-established belief systems. This is not usually a conscious process; it is an unconscious filtering of data to locate evidence that validates their world view. This filtering process, though

unintentional, often keeps people from accurately perceiving data that is right in front of them. It reduces their objectivity and keeps them from recognizing new possibilities.

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In our experience, the range of thought represented in the *group mind* can be a powerful antidote to habitual thought patterns. When people have contributed to a shared pool of data, they are much more apt to acknowledge the validity of that data. Carefully chosen focal questions can lead a group to a shared understanding about what that data means.

When everyone in an organization has equal access to the same data, and is supported in interpreting it effectively, team members begin to make decisions based on a common set of facts, rather than on what they think or hope to be true.

Shared Information Builds Trust

Trust is a difficult issue for virtual teams. Creating a shared pool of data is one way dispersed teams can build trust. Rather than staying isolated within their own constraints and concerns, team members gain a sense of the team as a whole. When people know what other team members are thinking, and can see their own ideas contributing to the group mind, they gain confidence in the decision-making process, and their trust in each other grows. Answers to the question, "What do we have in common?" naturally emerge.

Virtual workplaces can also support the kind of informal 'water cooler' conversations that readily occur when teams are co-located. We have been able to create rich, welcoming online environments by customizing a site to reflect the identity, process and 'sign-posts' of the team

itself. We've posted book reviews, lists of best practices and personalized bios of team members online, and have utilized threaded discussions and online symposiums with subject experts to create trust and camaraderie among dispersed team members.

3. Ensuring Rich, Qualitative Conversations

Creativity, clarity, and commitment arise from successful conversations. In responding to a question about what makes teams effective, Michael Schrage of MIT media labs said, "Innovative managers need to manage the interactions between people. What gives a conversation weight, dimension, and relevance is having a shared space where people's ideas can play out in front of one another." To collaborate effectively, people need access to each other's thinking. Dispersed teams, like all teams, need tools that encourage structured conversations about strategy, direction, performance, and change.

When teams aren't co-located, these kinds of substantive conversations can't occur naturally. Companies have tried to compensate for this through the use of e-mail and large-scale conference calls. Conference calls begin to address the issue of distance, but they can't resolve the issue of time. When an engineer in Manila has to get up at 2 A.M. to participate in a conference call, she is at a distinct disadvantage. It is only in an online

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environment, where everyone can engage in conversations when it is convenient, that time zone problems can be mitigated.

In order for meaningful conversations to percolate throughout an organization, they need to be:

- *archived for accessibility*
- *organized by process steps*
- *presented within a context*

Reducing Language Barriers

When conversations are written, as they are in the virtual environment, there is an added benefit. In a stream of written dialogue, it is easier to stop and clarify meanings. When one person doesn't understand what someone else has written, he has the time and opportunity to ask for clarification.

When people compose their thoughts in writing, they generally formalize their thinking and are more precise in their use of language. Idioms tend to disappear. There is less slang. For someone who isn't working in her native language, this less colloquial form of communication is easier to understand, leading to fewer misunderstandings and less miscommunication.

The fact that writing, rather than speaking, is the primary mode of communication on the Web can be a boon in other ways as well. If a dialogue at an offsite is taking place in English, and a participant whose primary language is not English is asked to respond to a question, he may feel unable to articulate his response quickly in a crowded conference room. But given the time to formulate a written response in his own

environment and in his own time, he is much more likely to respond fully and thoughtfully, thereby offering valuable insights to the group.

The Power of Anonymity

There is a time in every group's process when it is essential to hear the dissenting voices, to listen to the naysayers and the dreamers. To elicit the broadest range of honest feedback, leaders need to make it safe for people to tell the truth as they see it. In our experience, the best way to do this is to pose focal questions and then to give people the opportunity to respond anonymously.

When people know that their opinions are attributed, they often go along with the status quo because it is too risky to take an opposing stand. Prevailing ideas cannot be effectively challenged when politics inhibits people's responses. When the vice-president asks a leading question such as, "I think this is a good plan. What do you all think?" he elicits a very different response than he does when he poses the focal question, "What in this plan needs to be changed in order for it to be effective?" When focal questions are utilized and people are allowed to respond anonymously using our web-based software, leaders get a more creative and robust sense of what people are really thinking.

Peter Block says that "the most powerful thing you can do politically in an organization is to make the implicit explicit". Anonymity levels the playing field and allows the truth to emerge. Underlying ideas, questions, and assumptions are readily expressed when people are given the chance to speak freely without fear of negative consequences. As an added bonus, resistance to organizational change dissipates when people

feel that their concerns, feelings, and opinions have been solicited and heard.

Of course there are times when attributed comments are more appropriate to a group's process. When responsibilities are being assigned; when progress is being tracked; or when intact teams are working together over time, knowing who said what can be essential. Facilitators must be sensitive to using the right modality at the right time. When teams are operating in a virtual environment, it is critical that both anonymous and attributed feedback can be used.

4. An Established Set of Tools and Best Practices

To effectively tap the group mind, a team needs an effective process for identifying the changes they want to make and the actions they need to take. In our decision-making model, the collaborative process is presented as a continuum. Information is gathered, data is prioritized and planning directly utilizes the synthesized data. Initiatives are managed, responsibilities are assigned, progress is monitored, and goals are accomplished. The resulting knowledge is shared throughout the organization.

In learning organizations, five stages repeat in continuous cycles of growth and change implementation.

- *Data Gathering*
- *Prioritization*
- *Planning*
- *Initiative Management*
- *Knowledge Sharing*

Tools Alone Are Not Enough

A good collaborative tool needs to be flexible enough to accommodate all of the necessary process steps, but the steps themselves need to be facilitated by an experienced facilitator who is familiar with the scope of the tool, as well as the best means of achieving the desired end result.

No collaborative tool, in and of itself, can bring a process orientation to bear. A tool cannot tell you why people resist change and how to most effectively line them up behind a strategic initiative. A tool cannot offer the fresh eye of an outside consultant who is not enmeshed in company dynamics. Nor can it provide the seasoned perspective of an independent facilitator who has watched countless groups go through similar processes. In order to actualize their strategic goals, companies need more than a top notch online facilitation tool—they need a facilitator who understands strategic planning, human nature, obstacles to successful implementation, and the special considerations that need to be taken when working across distance, time, and culture.

As Bill Bruck states in his article *How Companies Collaborate Sharing Work Online*, "Human interaction must be at the center of the collaborative experience." No matter how sophisticated an online tool is, it can never supplant the need for skilled human facilitation.

Data Gathering: Find Out What People Think

For teams to come up with new and innovative solutions, they need to quickly generate a broad range of creative ideas. A good collaborative tool must include powerful tools to gather this data through brainstorming, threaded discussions, and online surveys.

Our web-based software enables a group of people to express their questions, responses, and ideas at the same time, quickly generating an expansive range of thought. When people contribute to the group mind, they do so in parallel, not serially. Rather than having one person speak at a time, people participate simultaneously, greatly increasing the speed with which data can be gathered. Two hundred salespeople gathered in a conference room at an offsite can answer a question about marketing strategy, and their collective responses immediately appear on the screens of the whole group. When that same sales force returns home, the same data gathering capacity can be utilized virtually as well.

Our software enables people to instantaneously switch between viewing the group-mind and contributing to it. Being able to access what the rest of the group is thinking is a powerful catalyst. When people see the sum total of everyone's thoughts and opinions, creativity is unleashed and new ideas flow. People's imagination is galvanized. Out-of-the box-thinking flourishes and innovation follows. The fact that contributions can be made anonymously only adds to this free flow of expression.

Rich data builds good decisions. Supporting

divergent thought not only turns up innovative ideas; it ultimately leads people to move toward consensus. We've watched this phenomenon occur repeatedly. When people are asked to contribute their own thinking to the group mind and are then given the opportunity to view the collective ideas of the group, they feel reassured that their own thinking is being taken seriously and become more receptive to other people's ideas.

Prioritizing: Make Sense of the Data

Divergent processes, such as the ones we are describing, can quickly generate a massive amount of data. It is imperative that there be tools in place to quickly manage, organize and synthesize this wealth of data so it can be focused and used effectively. To prevent data overload, this convergent toolset needs to include statistical tools for synthesizing brainstorms, eliminating redundancies, ranking options, voting on priorities, and identifying areas of agreement. Once these are identified, we have found it extremely beneficial to use the group mind to question, clarify, and elaborate on the group's conclusions.

Because our software supports parallel talk, it speeds up the decision-making process, freeing up time to talk about what the results mean and to revote. This second round of discussion is more than a confidence check; taking the time to clarify and revisit conclusions elicits new ideas and solidifies people's thinking.

As consultants, we have come to recognize the value of the small voice in the wilderness. When a group is pushing for consensus and dissenting opinions emerge, we stop and say, "Most of you

were headed in this one direction, but here are several voices that were strongly opposed. I wonder if there is something these people are seeing that you should be aware of? What do you think this person meant when she said this? What can you learn from her dissent?" Discussions resulting from these questions often unearth critical issues that were previously considered undiscussable. Calling attention to these issues early in a group's process ultimately generates much stronger buy-in from everyone when a decision is ultimately reached.

It is our experience that this kind of honest discussion, used in conjunction with convergent processes, leads groups to a cogent analysis of the issue and a clear understanding of what has to happen next. A norming process automatically begins to take place. As people see the energy of the group moving in a particular direction, they instinctively course-correct and move toward the center. Alignment naturally takes place. Consensus happens much more easily than it would otherwise, with greater buy-in from all involved.

Planning: Make Decisions That Stick

Organizations often make elaborate, sometimes brilliant strategic plans, only to have them fall apart when it comes time for execution. Just because a plan has been conceived and signed off on doesn't guarantee success.

In our work with a wide variety of companies, we've identified four major reasons initiatives fail and we have been able to successfully use the group mind to help mitigate them all.

The four fundamental problems are:

- *People don't understand the relationship between their work and the organization's larger strategic vision*
- *Team members whose job it is to execute the plan haven't felt included in the planning process*
- *Organizational infrastructure hasn't been changed to support the plan*
- *There are insufficient mechanisms for tracking progress*

Successful decision-making needs to happen in the context of a coordinated strategic plan. There needs to be a clear alignment between a team's actions and the company's overall strategic purpose. Disparate teams need to have a series of initiatives that can be linked together to focus their energy in the same direction. Team members must be able to clearly see how each of these initiatives supports the organization's larger strategic goals.

When teams aren't co-located, this kind of alignment is harder to achieve. Our web-based software makes it possible for dispersed team members to clearly understand the choices their organization is making, as well as the rationale for those choices. By using the group mind, people can look at proposed plans and give feedback in an archived environment that is available to everyone.

Contributing to the group mind helps people feel that their thinking was part of the final outcome.

Even if their ideas aren't ultimately adopted, people need to know that their thoughts were considered. In traditional settings, when people speak serially, there is never enough time to hear everyone's ideas and concerns. But when our software is used to poll the group mind as part of a planning process, people's ideas can be expressed and collated so quickly that it becomes possible to hear from everyone who will be influenced by the decision—those charged with its implementation as well as those affected by the change.

Incorporating the input of such a diverse pool of stakeholders increases innovation and often turns up problems and scenarios that might not have been otherwise considered, yielding a much more realistic, well grounded plan.

The *group mind* also provides a unique system of checks and balances. If an initiative is being railroaded through by a few dominant voices, the group mind can be used to counter balance that momentum.

Facilitators can readily locate opposing opinions: "Now wait a minute. If you want marketing to support his plan, you're going to have to give us more time." Or "This is a great idea, but how are we going to pay for it?" Culling out these dissenting voices, which have been systematically archived in the group mind, enables the group to address problems that might not have arisen until later, averting potentially costly oversights. Organizations can course correct before they even hit the ground.

Build Executive Support

No planning process can be successful when the organizational structure doesn't support its implementation. When the infrastructure of an organization remains static in the midst of a change effort, that effort is doomed to fail. Successful leaders understand that structural change is often required if project goals are to be achieved. One way leaders can stay in touch with necessary changes is by asking for input through the *group mind*.

In our experience, leaders have been very responsive to feedback received through the group mind. When executives can ask team members focal questions and quickly scan through their written responses, they get an immediate sense of the impediments the team is facing. Gaps become obvious and executives can take the necessary

steps to provide the requisite resources, changes, and support.

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Initiative Management: Make Sure the Work Gets Done

Once a strategic plan has been set in motion, leaders need to ensure that initiatives stay on track and are completed on schedule. To accomplish this, they must assign individual initiatives and clarify responsibilities. Progress, at every step along the way, needs to be monitored on a visual map that is readily available to all stake holders.

The group mind can help organizations build this kind of accountability. Within the larger collaborative environment, small project teams can have designated virtual workplaces structured to fit their specific needs and further their team's objectives. These individualized workplaces, when well designed, can not only serve the team in question but also reduce isolation by encouraging ongoing interactions with other teams.

When teams work on projects with multiple interdependencies, they need systems and mechanisms for interactive feedback so they can readily work with each other throughout a project's history. Effective long-distance collaboration requires a continuous feedback loop so problems can be addressed sooner. Rather than waiting for problems to be brought up at a periodic offsite, it is essential that a system be in place that enables problems to be raised and addressed expediently. In order for this kind of self-correcting mechanism to be in place, dispersed teams need to employ fast cycles of feedback.

Our software can be used to supply this kind of feedback. Teams can use it to offer support, to report on progress, to discuss interdependencies, and to monitor each other's progress. On reviewing the online project overview chart, one team may say to another, "We thought that getting Product Committee approval was our task. Why do you have it listed as yours?" This gives the other team a chance to clarify an important interdependency. Responsibilities are clarified, gaps are identified, and teams can readjust their priorities as needed.

Metrics Drive Performance

To measure progress and keep initiatives on track, teams need metrics that clearly delineate what they need to achieve. These can include budgets, costs, delivery dates, heightened customer satisfaction, or increased learning.

The positive impact of metrics is strengthened when team members are asked, through the group mind, to enumerate their own measures of success. People are far more interested in achieving positive results when they gauge success by standards they have established for themselves. When team members set key performance criteria such as, "We will improve customer satisfaction ratings by 5 points," or "We'll reduce product cycle time by two months," they are more likely to put out the effort to create the result. This sets the stage for enhanced accountability and helps sustain effective action over time.

Organizations can use our web-based software to broadcast metrics to a group. As people see the actual numbers, they react to the inevitable gaps between proposed plans and actual results, and a rich, valuable conversation arises. Marketing might say, "We can't meet our goal if the engineers are going to be a week late." By culling the group mind, leaders can readily see how gaps affect different team members. As a result, problems can be remedied much earlier than they might have been.

Knowledge Sharing: Maximize Innovation

To ensure continued innovation, organizations need to communicate what they know to everyone in the organization, both current and future. When team members have the opportuni-

ty to learn from other people's lessons, they can avoid repeating the same mistakes. Having roadmaps enables people to build upon strategies that have previously been successful, rather than having to continually reinvent the wheel. When the group mind is used to capture and publish what people have learned, an invaluable archive is created. Knowledge can be stored in a structured way that people can access indefinitely. As more people benefit from the repository of wisdom that resides in the group mind, more people contribute their learning. The group mind grows, eventually becoming a storehouse of collective intelligence for the whole organization.

Knowledge can also be shared through communities of practice. Communities of practice are groups of people who share a common interest. A community of practice might be several sales managers in one organization or a group of project managers who work in different companies. By engaging in open dialogue with each other, everyone's understanding increases and knowledge grows.

Providing communities of practice for specific disciplines multiplies productivity and increases creative thought. Tapping the group mind is a great way to create communities of practice so that people can share their thinking and build on each other's ideas.

The Benefits of the Group Mind

For more than eleven years, we have been developing software and best practices to harness the power of the group mind.

With both dispersed and co-located teams, we have seen the group mind help leaders:

- *Ask the right questions*
- *Get the right people together*
- *Make quick decisions*
- *Align an organization or a team*
- *Quickly understand strategic priorities*
- *Identify gaps in understanding, process, planning, and performance*

The world has changed and it will not go back. Businesses are now interacting across an electronic interface. Cycle times for innovation have gotten shorter. The global marketplace has been deconstructed. Organizations that learn to effectively employ the power of the group mind will have a definite advantage in meeting these challenges.

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GroupMind Solutions is a consultancy of organizational development and business process consultants working with software engineers to develop web based collaboration tools for implementing change through alignment. Our purpose is to build alignment and effective change in organizations, by developing cutting-edge collaboration practices and tools for use by a broad segment of consultants and process managers.

The GroupMind Express™ tools greatly increase the capability for managers to swiftly change the direction, make decisions and communicate information about strategy throughout the organization. We believe that the future of organizational consulting and strategic planning lies in the marriage of technology with the knowledge of resistance to change, so that people become more effective and efficient in their efforts.

Our clients and consultant partners return to us over and over because they appreciate our ability to create highly satisfying and productive partnerships with them to develop solutions for successful change. Clients tell us that they value the simplicity, speed and clarity of our tools, as well as our integrity and belief that informed decisions lead to lasting change.

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