

# The Register-Guard

## **DON KAHLE: When it comes to group dynamics, diversity works**

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**Opinion: Editorials & Letters: Story**

Where do good ideas come from? First, you must distinguish between types of ideas.

Expressive ideas are invented, but responsive ideas are discovered. Inventions typically flow from individual genius, but discoveries nearly prove the collective dynamic we casually call “community.”

Groups are amazingly adept at solving problems. But the best group dynamic allows individuals to contribute their own genius and generosity.

Nathan Myhrvol believes there’s a formula for this collective inspiration out there to be discovered. He founded Intellectual Ventures ([www.intellectualventures.com](http://www.intellectualventures.com)) in 1999 after leaving Microsoft.

The company put a bunch of very smart people in a room with a problem that needs solving. They facilitate their interactions lightly — only to prevent participants from bullying or obsessing.

If you abandon hope that the original problem will shape the solutions to be discovered, fecundity explodes. Intellectual Ventures operates on the premise that good ideas are a dime a dozen.

The formula requires just one other ingredient: diversity. Not political or ethnic diversity, though that may help, but diversity of intellectual backgrounds.

A bunch of brain surgeons will end up talking shop and all the usual answers will be parroted with a comfortable familiarity. But put a physicist and a computer programmer and a brain surgeon together in a room, and the solutions they fashion will be surprising. Some might even work.

Acting on the ideas that will work is how Myhrvol’s company makes money. It was chronicled by Malcomb Gladwell in a New Yorker magazine essay last May ([www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/05/12/080512fa\\_fact\\_gladwell?currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/05/12/080512fa_fact_gladwell?currentPage=all)).

How can these findings be put to use closer to home?

I’ve been involved recently in two. Each has been written about by others, but a first-person account may be helpful.

The West Eugene Collaborative began in late 2006. A diverse group set out to test the strength of diversity against a real-time problem. The traffic challenges in west Eugene was chosen.

The diversity of the group exposed problems almost immediately. The problem to be addressed is not singular, but rather a complex swirl of competing and interlocking problems.

Traffic may be the problem most keenly felt, but land use affects transportation patterns, and environmental concerns shape land use options. Solving only one, or each in sequence, invites a never-ending game of “wack-a-mole.”

Problems don’t stay solved because each challenge feeds the others. Only a package of solutions actually can solve the problem.

That package of solutions has a complexity all its own, but it addresses the varied concerns around a very large table. The full solution may take 20 years to implement, and that’s cold comfort for somebody stuck in traffic this afternoon, but there were no “silver bullets” to be found.

Some will see the solutions as too small (alternate routes with better signage) and others will identify solutions as too large (a multi-way boulevard). But if all the solutions are taken together and set against a 20-year timeline, they can be deemed both adequate and affordable. The second instance also used this cauldron of conscription — diverse interests and backgrounds united only by a problem to be solved — but over an amazingly short amount of time.

The Oregon Department of Transportation wanted to make good on its promise of a signature bridge crossing the Willamette River. Artists, architects, landscape architects, traffic experts, park advocates and structural engineers were gathered to bring that power of diverse genius to a very specific situation.

(I wrote about the process in this space in early February.)

Participants gave up two Saturdays for intense exploration and assigned seating. Six teams were formed to delve into specific issues. The results were surprising and energizing.

Again, there was no silver bullet, unless you can quantify the value of a collaborative community effort. A pattern of images and opportunities emerged. Different teams discovered the same themes, as if they had been eavesdropping on one another.

The “families of findings” will be described elsewhere. From my vantage point close up, I want to add only that what emerged was not invented, but discovered.

What actually gets built in both instances will be up to policy makers, who bring their own pressures to the process. In both cases, they now have solid raw materials to work with.

Don Kahle ([fridays@dksez.com](mailto:fridays@dksez.com)) is a member of the West Eugene Collaborative. Its final report can be found on the Internet at [www.odrc.state.or.us/WestEugeneForum.php](http://www.odrc.state.or.us/WestEugeneForum.php). Kahle is also the executive director for the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects. AIA’s presentation of its “families of findings” for the Willamette River Bridge can be found at [www.aiaswo.org/15](http://www.aiaswo.org/15).