

Foreword to We Think - Charles Leadbeater.

By Sanne Roemen (<http://sanneroemen.nl>) november 2009.

Translation donated by Tim Bruls via Twitter. <http://www.timbruls.nl/>

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‘When you and I have a dollar each, and we exchange them, we both still have one dollar.  
When you and I both have an idea, and we exchange them, we both have two ideas.’<sup>1</sup>

In a nutshell, that is the message of Charles Leadbeater in *We-think*: sharing is multiplying. He describes creativity, mass-innovation and collaboration beyond the boundaries of organizations and departments. One could call it a utopian view on things, but to me he describes nothing less than reality itself. A reality where it is no longer necessary to freeze ideas into formal hierarchies, a reality where you can muster people to commit to a common cause faster and easier than ever before.

The world we live in is all about information and connections. The question is: are we on the verge of collapsing under the strain of information overload and all our casual online “friends”? Or can we find a way to organize and mobilize that collective intelligence and all those connections to become a lasting inspirational force? Every day I come across people who complain about overflowing inboxes and don’t even want to think about RSS, blogs, wikis, twitter and *LinkedIn*, but increasingly I see examples that illustrate that it is possible to use all that information and all these connections. By using *We-think* as a filter.

In this interconnected information society people are having trouble to find each other. The number of “acquaintances” has increased dramatically, but it’s virtually impossible to know the passions and talents of all these people. Managers don’t know what their employees know and do, colleagues are unaware that they can profit from each other’s knowledge. The wheel is reinvented everywhere repeatedly and knowledge leaks away in broad streams. Freelancers are plodding on their own with new ideas and there is much fragmentation among public organizations. There is still a large group of people who think that every desire needs its own complex and expensive IT system to be fulfilled. A system that takes eons to build, and is obsolete the moment you start to use it.

At the same time I see smart people within organizations and networks who use Web 2.0 technology that is free to use and takes only minutes to get started. They cobble together a wiki, a blog and a microblogging service, create a group on *LinkedIn* or start a Ning-community. They go their own way. They organize themselves and solve problems. They freely exchange knowledge and experience, meet, learn, teach en build a secured source of knowledge. Sharing is multiplying.

Leadbeater describes these processes, gives lots of examples and names critical factors for success and failure. *We-think* originates when independent individuals work together effectively in greatly diverse groups. It is all about the right mix of participation and collaboration, diversity and shared values, independence and community spirit. That mix cannot be caught in a recipe and I don’t think it ever can be. However, there is a list of ingredients and that is what Leadbeater describes in his book.

Another thing that appeals to me in this book, and what distinguishes it from it’s blood brothers (*Wikinomics*, *The Long Tail*, *The Cluetrain Manifesto*), is that Leadbeater puts everything in a broader perspective. He describes historic values like community spirit, solidarity and trust. Values that where the lubricant of society, back in the old days. Leadbeater shows that old values return as a breeding ground for successful creative group

processes. “Radical Old Thinking” The new is so much older than we thought. It's interesting to see how this Web 2.0 “modernism” is thoroughly rooted in old traditions. Leadbeater describes the impact of *We-think* on political and social structures, on science, economy and the public sector. Fortunately, he doesn't ignore possible negative effects.

Will the whole world breathe *We-think* in a while? Probably not. Can it be adapted to all economic and social sectors? Not likely. Is it the solution for all the problems in our world, from depleting energy sources to the unequal dividing of power and wealth? Not anytime soon. But if this development continues, and more and more people unite around a shared passion or problem, organise themselves to get to a solution, then something positive has been set in motion. *We-Think* is an optimistic, hopeful book. ‘Pessimists are right, optimists are successful’<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I found this quote on the HYPERLINK "<http://www.zinboek.nl/de-schrijver>" website van managementdenker André Meiresonne.

<sup>2</sup> I found this quote on a weblog, I could not determine the source.



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