

[Going Global: Argentine Ants Show the Way

By Doug Kirkpatrick

According to a recent article in BBC Earth News,¹ scientists have recently discovered an ant mega-colony that has apparently colonized much of the world, rivaling humans in the sheer scale of their global domination. The Argentine ant (*Linepithema humile*) mega-colony originated in South America, but it now spans much of California, Western Japan, and the Mediterranean—one super-colony apparently covers 6,000 kilometers of Mediterranean coastline. The ants' chemical hydrocarbon signatures provided proof of the common identity of separate colonies existing on multiple continents.

Human beings are the unwitting facilitators for these ant immigrants, providing convenient transportation in the form of ships, planes and cars to every continent except Antarctica (ironically, the only continent beginning with the word "ant"). Through a series of experiments, scientists learned that whenever ants from the largest super-colonies in Europe, Japan and California came together, the normally territorial creatures acted like one big happy family. The most likely explanation: a common genetic ancestry—beginning in Argentina.

The ants have a fairly straightforward mission: find food, find shelter and reproduce. Though they are considered significant pests (they happily attack na-



tive livestock and agricultural crops to feed their thriving new super-colonies), the way they accomplish their mission is still quite impressive. There are no ant supervisors, managers, team leaders, bosses or vice presidents directing the ants' activities once they disembark from a ship's hold on a distant shore—so how do they achieve their objectives? Apparently, the same dogged way they pursued the original ant mission in South America: singular focus, perseverance, and teamwork (through the transmission of chemical signals in their cuticles).

Humans have often turned to ants in the past for instructional models—references to ant behavior pepper ancient texts; the classic toy Ant Farm teaches children about work by watching ants go about their business in a model of a real farm. Can ants, the supreme self-managers of nature, provide any lessons for scalability of self-managed human activity? The larger elements seem obvious: a crystal-clear shared mission, high levels of communication, clearly defined roles, individual initiative. Argentine ants have all those attributes—their astonishing (albeit unwelcomed) success proves it. What prevents humans from self-managing an

organization on a very large scale, given the right tools and resources?

Ants use chemical signals to provide activity feedback and facilitate coordination. Like ants in colonies, people in self-managed organizations can avail themselves of methods to provide feedback and coordinate activities. For example, The Morning Star Company refers to its feedback architecture as Steppingstones, viewed as pathways toward perfect performance (even if one never quite arrives there). Each colleague identifies Steppingstones pertinent to his or her relevant business processes. Each process may have one or more Steppingstones attached to it. Steppingstones may be common to multiple colleagues (who are executing the same process, for example), or may be unique to an individual. The frequency of publication is appropriate to the specific process (some financial measures are quarterly, some production measures are hourly or real time). Each Morning Star factory has myriad Steppingstones covering all facets of operations, administration, distribution, raw materials acquisition, quality, and

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¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/earth/hi/earth_news/newsid_8127000/8127519.stm

doing a good job on that, but you need to work on this.' There's no structure that I can look at and track where I am and where others are. But that's from every aspect of the school. Everybody is just winging it as they go.

"I don't like it because you don't know what you're doing, kinda. You're just kinda going along with everybody else, but you're not really sure it's the right thing. And if you do the wrong thing, they're quick to correct you and say, 'Why did you do that?' and get mad at you."

Name: Kelly*
Company: In-N-Out
Job: Level 5 Associate (Does everything except cook the burgers)
Tenure: 3 ½ years
Rated her Job: 10 (out of 10)



I asked Kelly to tell me what it is about the job that makes it a 10.

"In-N-Out is a great company. It's a great place to work for, and it's a really fun job. It's really good money and the people are all great."

I asked her to tell me if she's good at her

job, and if so, how she knows.

"Yes! I know because I still have a job!"

I asked her if they get any sort of feedback at In-N-Out.

"Oh yeah; a lot. Mostly through the 800 number or online—customer feedback."

And as to feedback from management?

"Yeah; they have what's called 'QFC'—quality, friendliness and cleanliness. They come in once a month and go through the entire store, check and see if it's clean, check to see how the workers are doing, and they'll basically tell you how you're doing. You get a rating—a percentage,

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marketing and sales. The ultimate Steppingstone, unsurprisingly, is return on assets—a prerequisite for long-term survival. Steppingstones are ideally published and available for inquiry, and frequently consist of time-series data presented in graphical form. People react to the Steppingstones information, adjusting and coordinating as needed.

In a self-managed human organization, there are no traditional bosses. There is only work, and people to perform the work. All the traditional functions of management (planning, organizing, controlling, selecting, monitoring, etc.) are borne to one degree or another by each participant in the organization, or delegated to others by agreement. If the people in an organization know what work to do, how to do it, how to coordinate with other members of the organization, how to select new members, and how to identify and measure what's important—all pursuant to a reasonable strategy—it's hard to see why they can't scale the organization at least as successfully as a mega-colony of Argentine ants. •

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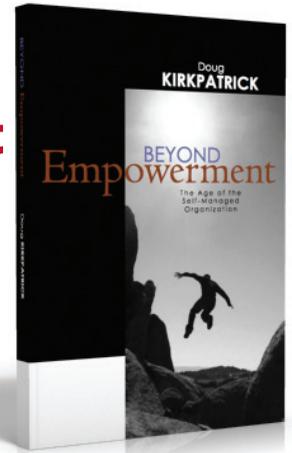
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Feedback on the Road *Continued from page 5*

and of course, the higher, the better. You see your store's numbers, and you can see every other store's numbers.

"And, if you sell so many burgers within the year—you get a yearly goal—and if you meet or exceed that goal, they rent out a facility for you—you get to pick—and they bring in other people from other stores to run your store for the day while all of the associates go out and play. You get the goal at the beginning of the year based on your previous year's burger sales. They take what you did last year, and raise it for the year. And if we go over that goal, we get to go play, and the store manager gets extra money for exceeding the goal."

She told me how in a previous year, they had exceeded their goal, and all of the store associates got to go to an indoor cart-racing track and have a day of fun.

Summary

Feedback has one fundamental purpose: to provide direction. It informs an employee's actions by either affirming their current performance and actions, or providing a cue to switch direction and refocus. According to our interviews, feedback has varying characteristics in different organizations, depending largely on that organization's fundamental organizational philosophies. Those characteristics seem to naturally fall into a few opposing category pairings that make for convenient comparison among the various companies represented in our mini-survey.

Objective vs. Subjective Feedback

The most common type of feedback referenced by those I spoke with was customer feedback—a subjective (and, at best, sporadic) indicator of customer satisfaction. Most of those I spoke with also referred to a performance review as a type of

feedback they receive—a periodic subjective assessment from their manager. Only a few spoke of receiving any sort of objective performance feedback, the most notable being Kelly from In-N-Out, who received not only monthly Quality, Friendliness and Cleanliness reports (another subjective assessment), but also reports of burgers sold at her store in comparison to other stores.

Individual vs. Enterprise Level Feedback

Individual level feedback (i.e. performance reviews) was the most prevalent form of feedback received among those interviewed. In-N-Out proved our most notable example of enterprise level feedback. Kelly, our In-N-Out employee referenced their "Annual Burgers Sold" metric, and also referenced the store's QFC (Quality, Friendliness and Cleanliness) ratings.