

# 2 Pages on Intellectual Focal Points

---



## Introduction

*What's the reason for people to work together towards a common goal? Presumably, it is to create something that they could not do on their own. When you go to work<sup>1</sup>, you and your fellow programmers set out to create value – by combining your contributions. **The things that you personally do might even be useless without the things others do.** You have let go of your individuality in order to create a primitive<sup>2</sup> intellectual focal point.*

## First, the Truth

The real world of collaboration is not simple. **We often forget to work together**, which makes progress very slow. Our **individual goals often do not match those that we are given** by management – after all, we do possess individuality and creativity; that's why we were hired in the first place. But the three most common reasons why we fail to work together are:

- 1) **There is no clear goal.** This is detrimental to any attempt at focusing efforts in a specific direction. It's the single biggest problem of modern software projects.
- 2) **There is no working authority.** Any group of people needs authority; that authority could simply be the rules of the group, or a manager who the individuals trust – it doesn't really matter *how*, but authority has to exist in order to avoid different ideas taking the efforts in different directions.
- 3) **The group is dysfunctional.** It doesn't matter how much skill you have if the group doesn't work. Motivation will be low, progress will be slow, and the bad energy will eventually break some of the group members. (Or, the project will be killed, perhaps dissolving the group.)

I find the above to be very good news; just consider this **massive untapped potential**, just waiting there for us all!

---

<sup>1</sup> As usual this article will talk about programmers, but the topic is quite generic.

<sup>2</sup> Why do I say primitive? Well, I am feeling science fiction-ish and do have some new ideas that I might tell you about. Later.

## What Is an Intellectual Focal Point?

The problems that I've outlined can be visualized as rays of light emanating from individual sources (programmers). Each ray has direction (where do I start, where is the goal?) and strength (how well do my skills match the task?). Some things make the rays weaker, for example when motivation goes down because of a dysfunctional group. Other issues point the rays in different directions, for example the lack of clear goals.

But an **intellectual focal point** is what you get when individual programmers (light rays) are working shoulder to shoulder towards the same goal (lens). *The intellectual focal point is where the different rays converge.* It's an absolutely beautiful thing to observe, and it's the **dream state of any team**. Individually, the rays are too weak to make a big difference. When converging through a carefully crafted lens, they will easily cause a great fire.

If you have ever worked in a good team (programming, playing football, or anything else) where an intellectual focal point was created and sustained for some time, you know that it's an awesome feeling to be one of the light rays. **You become unstoppable. You defeat your deadlines. You are all in the zone.**

## Can You Create Intellectual Focal Points?

Of course, any manager will want these intellectual focal points to burn the asses of the competition, and light warm and friendly camp fires for the customers. Team member will want the intellectual focal points too, but preferably directed towards the goals *they* think are most important<sup>3</sup>, using the tools and technologies *they* believe in.

For team members, I have an exclusive piece of advice – **help other members of your team become as successful as possible**. *The better they become, the more power you will get access to* when they listen to your great ideas.

For managers, there are many things to consider when creating intellectual focal points. Perhaps the most important consideration is that the goal (the lens<sup>4</sup>) has to be very clear and correctly placed. You are directing a lot of power in one single direction, so if you miss the target, you might just be in big trouble.

If you do manage to create a goal that your team will agree on<sup>5</sup>, it's time to go into **active supervision mode**. The goal will move (everything in a complex environment moves), and the team moves too (see previous parenthesis). Your job is to continuously adapt to the changes and keep the efforts directed towards the goal, and the goal in the sights of your team. On top of that, you will have the unenviable task of keeping the team functioning, which is always going to be hard work. Human programmers are strong individuals – and that's what makes them great – but individuality does not enjoy surrendering to the will of a team.

Intellectual focal points have awesome power. Aim for them in all your projects.

Thank you for reading,

Bjorn Karlsson

---

<sup>3</sup> We all know best, and we know different things. Go figure.

<sup>4</sup> Isn't the focal point the goal? No! The light rays must target the lens in order to create a place where convergence can occur.

<sup>5</sup> Very few managers possess this skill – those who do should earn top dollar.