

Insights

Communicate, Collaborate and Innovate to Reduce Infant Mortality



Peter Gloor, PhD, research scientist - Center for Collective Intelligence, MIT's Sloan School of Management

Compared to other Western countries, infant mortality in the U.S. is shockingly high. High infant mortality is a social problem that can only be solved through massive collaboration and out-of-the-box innovation.

To tackle this issue I propose to tap into the “creativity of the swarm,” using collaborative innovation to help parents and caregivers take the best possible care of their children even before they are born and increase the quality of care in the first years of an infant’s life.

A good starting place, I believe, is to connect parents and healthcare providers in what I call Collaborative Innovation Networks (COINs). These are dynamic teams in which diverse stakeholders with a shared vision collaborate to achieve a common goal. COINs form from the interaction of like-minded, self-motivated individuals who enable innovative ideas to be pushed forward. The participants join because they are committed to the common vision and want to be part of the innovation that “will change the world.”

How many people could be motivated by the goal of reducing infant mortality?

Through COINs, we can collectively address key topics such as breastfeeding, screening for developmental delays, and recognizing maternal depression. We can increase the quality of care for infants by creating peer learning and innovation groups of parents, where knowledgeable parents help others learn to take better care of their babies. Weaving a network of social support around parents in need helps them weather the storms of daily life. Just like in the beehive where bees take care of their young as a community, mothers and fathers in a collaborative innovation network can learn from and support each other.

One of the key factors for high-functioning COINs is communication. As we have found in our research, better communication leads to better collaboration, which in turn leads to more innovation. Ultimately, we want to increase the collective intelligence of these teams. In research at the Center for Collective Intelligence, my colleagues found that there are four key predictors that will increase collective intelligence of groups:

- The more team participants communicate with one another, the more collectively intelligent the team is.
- When participants communicate equally, instead of a few participants doing most of the talking, the collective intelligence of the team is higher.
- When everyone contributes equally to team success, a team is more collectively intelligent.
- The higher the emotional intelligence (measured through a test called “Reading the Mind in the Eyes”) of each team member is, the higher the collective intelligence of the team is.

It all starts with connecting parents and healthcare providers, encouraging them to better communicate such that they can innovate more. Talking more, talking more evenly, contributing ideas more evenly, and taking care of the emotional needs of each other will help to create better networks that will generate better ideas to reduce infant mortality.

Peter Gloor, PhD, is a research scientist at the Center for Collective Intelligence at MIT's Sloan School of Management, is the pioneer of the Collaborative Innovation Networks (COINs) concept and is an expert advisor to NICHD on the Infant Mortality COIN project.