

SYNTHETRON WHITE PAPER

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Listen to Learn...Learn to Listen

Synthetron uses evolutionary process to capture the collaborative wisdom of stakeholder groups

This innovative approach uses real-time, online brainstorming with 10-1,000 participants to capture an organisation's most important insights in a conclusive and efficient way.

by Joanne Celens and Catherine Shovlin

As the locus of insights and knowledge becomes more and more dispersed within organisations, and development cycles speed up, having an ear to the ground is more important than ever. New technologies like Synthetron enable decision makers to discover what internal and external stakeholders are thinking – and identify actionable insights to help them improve decision making.

This paper examines how intelligent brainstorming tools can help an organisation achieve better results from collaboration. Several cases highlight the benefits of efficiently listening by using new tools like Synthetron to provide management with an early warning system and employees with a valuable sense of engagement.

**LISTENING TO YOUR
STAKEHOLDERS:
A KEY SUCCESS FACTOR IN THE
KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY**

How can you understand what motivates or demotivates your employees if you cannot listen to them in an open and efficient way? How can you satisfy your customers if you cannot understand what they really want? How can you capture

the insights of management teams spread across a wide geographical area without spending hours travelling and sitting in meetings? How can you represent the best interests of your constituents and ensure your re-election when you don't know what they're really thinking and traditional opinion polls have proven to be unreliable, superficial indicators? How do you know if your strategic message was ever understood out there in the organisation?

In the knowledge economy, **information has become more dispersed** than ever before. At the same time, taking advantage of the insights of employees, stakeholders, customers and constituents has become an important source of competitive advantage. As the balance of knowledge shifts away from traditional decision makers, more and more managers and politicians appreciate that they need to listen well and capture these new insights. This information can serve as valuable input to speed up reaction time and deal with issues before they become unmanageable. Highly effective listening has become more important than ever before, yet tapping the knowledge of employees, stakeholders, customers

and constituents remains a challenge. **Truly listening** has always been difficult in one-to-one interactions, and meetings involving more than two people only increase the complexity. Everyone can recall team meetings during which the listening process broke down - the breakdown may have been caused by participants who did not share what they really thought, by a dominant personality with a higher position in the hierarchy who voiced his or her opinion so strongly that nobody dared to speak out in opposition, or simply because there was no preparedness to listen in the first place.

In recent years however, the clear benefits of capturing this dispersed knowledge have spurred the development of new tools and approaches to overcome these challenges and support more effective listening.

UNVEILING THE WISDOM OF CROWDS

In his best-seller *The Wisdom of Crowds* (2004), James Surowiecki advances the idea that *“Under the*

right circumstances, groups are smarter than the people in them”.

He supports his assertion with numerous examples that stress the importance of listening to the open discussions of independent and diverse members of the “crowd”. According to Surowiecki, these discussions should take place in a decentralised way with all members of the crowd having open access to information. A mechanism must then be found that aggregates this wisdom.

The observation that useful information is often floating around in organisations but unavailable to decision makers inspired Paul Verhaeghe, formerly a director at management consulting firm McKinsey & Company, to write the book *Sluiers (Veils) over Corporate* (2003) and then go on to create Synthetron. Verhaeghe wanted to give organisations a new way to address the issue. In his book, Verhaeghe explores the issue of how the truth can be **“veiled”** in the workplace. Apart from the usual human needs to be socially accepted and impress those around us there are corporate

politics and group dynamics that cloud the picture. The combined effect is that to get a straight answer to a straight question is often challenging, if not impossible. Most of these veils are embedded in the corporate culture and hence structurally limit the capacity of an organisation to capture insights from “many” (people throughout the organisation). Moreover, most corporate cultures are performance-driven and therefore focus on the command and control processes required to realise goals. In such an environment, there is bound to be a tension between the “just make it happen” drive and the “tell me what or how we can do better” attitude. For organisations to be able to truly listen and capture valuable input or get honest feedback from competent groups, communication must be based on effective group collaboration in an *unveiled* way. Devising an approach to unveil communication for large groups is the inspiration behind the development of Synthetron.

“useful information is often floating around in organisations but unavailable to decision makers”

CASE: LISTENING SUPPORTS THE SMOOTH MERGER OF TWO BANKS

In the merger of two private banks, management was afraid of losing valuable members of one company’s sales force and therefore decide to **listen**, engaging them in a series of interactive discussions using Synthetron technology. First, management carefully listened to the sales force (in two different discussions by tenure), identifying the most important arguments in a discussion about their level of alignment to the merger vision, their fears, the potential bottlenecks,

their hopes and suggestions. This outcome helped management to take difficult decisions and to give feedback. A few months later another Synthetron discussion focused on re-assessing the level of alignment and engaging participants in identifying key success factors and actions on which to focus. This generated valuable insights on the level of support for the decisions taken and the way to manage the implementation successfully.

HOW TO CAPTURE THE GROUP'S INSIGHTS

The challenge in organisations is to develop aggregation processes whereby the correct feedback percolates from the periphery – where people are closer to the reality of everyday problems – to those at the centre who participate in the planning and strategic thinking that drive decision making. What is needed are ways to support and combine two so far underdeveloped communication streams: (1) open peer interaction between many employees (many to many); and (2) an upward feedback to the decision makers (many to one).

This implies that the success criteria for a communication solution are that it be:

1. Safe: discussion takes place in a safe space, free from the pressures of politics or peers. This is essential to encourage participants to put their authentic thoughts before the group without any fear of reprisal should those thoughts not be shared by others.

2. Interactive: an intense peer-to-peer interaction, such as that in an efficient face-to-face discussion, must be possible. Participants must be able to present their ideas and the others must be able to respond (many-to-many communication).

3. Aggregated: the discussion must use an aggregation protocol that allows participants to validate or refute individual opinions within the group in order to arrive at a collective group conclusion. This aggregation of the various points of view by the group itself provides the best feedback to the manager who has been entrusted with solving the business issue in question (aggregated many-to-one communication).

4. Scalable: the communication platform must be scalable. It must remove the limitations of a face-to-face meeting or teleconference in which true interactivity typically breaks down once the group exceeds 6 participants.

5. Recorded: the group's conclusions (minutes of the meeting) must be recorded simply, clearly and concisely as output for the group and the decision makers.

“Effective listening needs to be safe, interactive, aggregated, scalable and recorded.”



WHAT TOOLS ARE AVAILABLE FOR LISTENING TO CROWDS ?

The development of new collaborative discussion methods is enabling organisations to harness the power of listening and to use the insights that are dispersed amongst “many” (i.e. multiple individuals or groups).

Many of these tools are not real time, cannot handle large-scale participation or fall into the collaborative filtering trap of top of list syndrome.

Electronic brainstorming systems such as Group Support Systems (GSS),

and Anyzing are used as electronic blackboards. They facilitate the classical brainstorming processes of gathering ideas, clustering and ranking, or support even more complex thinking and decision processes. Most of these systems are geared towards systematic problem-solving based on a very precise sequence of process steps. With sufficient discipline and motivation by the users, these brainstorming systems work very well. Because they are modelled on the physical interaction of placing post-it notes on a blackboard, however, they suffer from the limitations inherent in the post-it model. They do not create the space for an organic, iterative interaction

and the filtering by large groups can often feel a bit mechanical. Perhaps for these reasons, most of the time these electronic brainstorming systems are still applied in physical settings.

Mass interactions such as on-line jams, chat rooms, blogs, social networks, wikis and fora are developing ways to listen to many. On-line jams are most similar to Synthetron except in the areas of real-time interaction and collaborative filtering. While these new media for mass interaction offer opportunities for peer-to-peer communication and are taking their place in the world communications market, they suffer from several drawbacks.

THE LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT LISTENING TOOLS

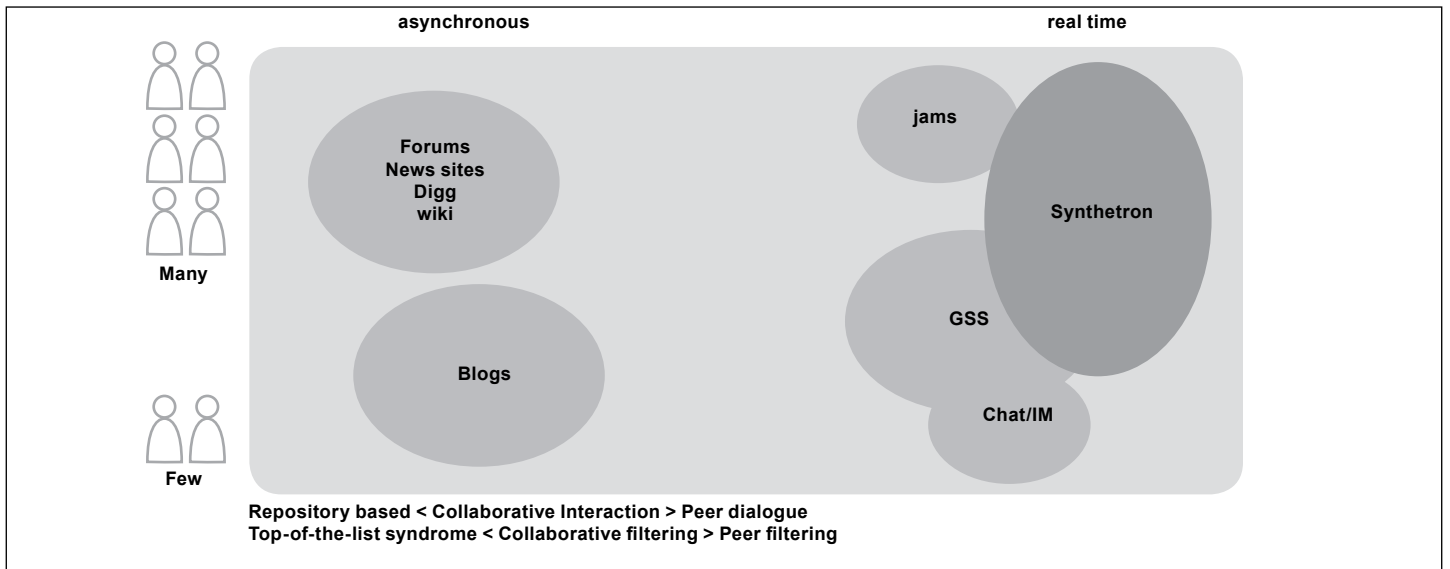
1.Limited scalability: most have difficulty scaling up in real time – if multiple participants are online at the same time the interaction becomes overloaded and system performance degrades.

2.No true dialogue: many are really repository based interactions based on sending messages and checking much later if feedback has been given. They do not give the feeling of a true, simultaneous dialogue between multiple participants (a peer-to-peer collaborative discussion).

3.Limited synthesis: while some do give participants the opportunity to synthesise ideas or rank them collaboratively, if they have a collaborative filtering, most suffer from “top of the list syndrome”: once an idea or statement rises to the top of the list it can establish a psychological dominance in the minds of many participants. In contrast, with peer-to-peer collaborative filtering, all ideas have an equal chance to be selected. The ideas that receive the most support rise to the top in an evolutionary process.

4.Not anonymous: in addition, most of these tools are not anonymous, yet anonymity is often an essential condition for open, truthful conversations in the corporate world.

The Synthetron solution goes beyond traditional brainstorming methods, but rather than being simply a replacement for the brainstorming process it is a new way of holding a discussion. By applying the Synthetron approach, it is possible to really listen to large groups and understand what the group itself identifies as the most important ideas.



SYNTHETRON AS A LISTENING SOLUTION

The Synthetron discussion platform meets the above criteria for an ideal listening solution by allowing real-time, interactive, written and conclusive discussions involving just 10 or as many as 1,000 participants. Each participant sits behind their personal computer and anonymously identifies and intuitively filters the best insights from the entire group.

The conversation is anonymous and conclusive. The anonymity allows every participant to actively participate and have an equal say. A face-to-face discussion, in contrast, is often dominated by the most vocal or powerful person in the room. With open listening, the emphasis shifts from who made a specific statement to how many people qualified that statement as important because they agree or strongly disagree with it. The result is conclusive and represents the collective wisdom of the entire group.

“SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST” IDEAS: SYNTHETRON BASED ON A DARWINIAN EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

The Synthetron software ensures that only the ideas that receive the group’s support survive. It facilitates the interaction and propagation of ideas between participants so that they have a consistent discussion environment, do not get overloaded and are able to develop the group’s wisdom.

The approach is based on two unique features:¹

1. The software **organises the group**: The system organises participants into a “basket of oranges” type structure such that everyone has

CASE: MULTINATIONAL ENSURES ALIGNMENT OF 100 TOP MANAGERS WITH A STRATEGIC CHANGE PROGRAMME

The leadership of a multinational decided to investigate the alignment of its top 100 managers with the strategic change programme launched 4 months earlier via a cascading communication process. All 100 managers were invited to join a one hour online, anonymous Synthetron meeting to respond, discuss and validate their views. How urgent was the change

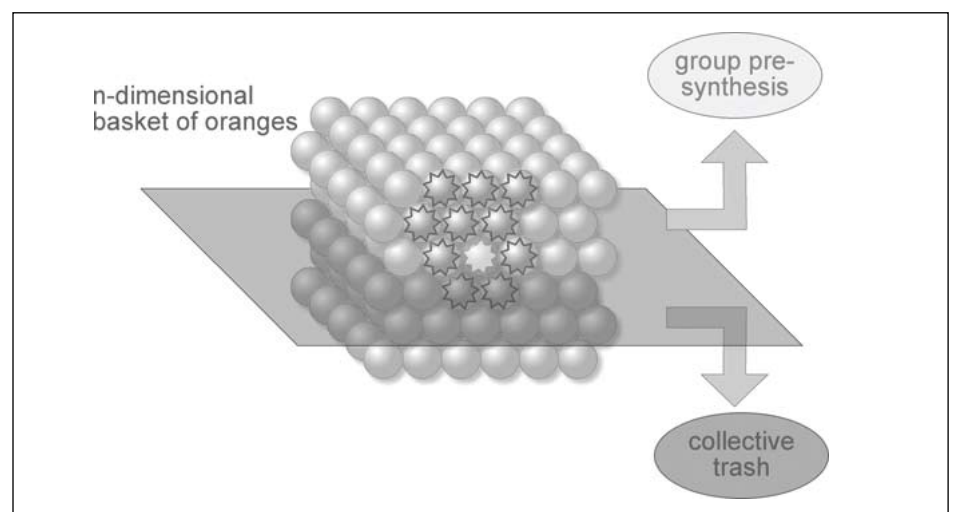
programme? How far had the change programme been adopted, and translated into action? What were the bottlenecks? Finally, they were asked to identify how the strategic change could be accelerated and suggest improvements. The outcome was richer and clearer than any classical interview round and generated new and actionable insights.

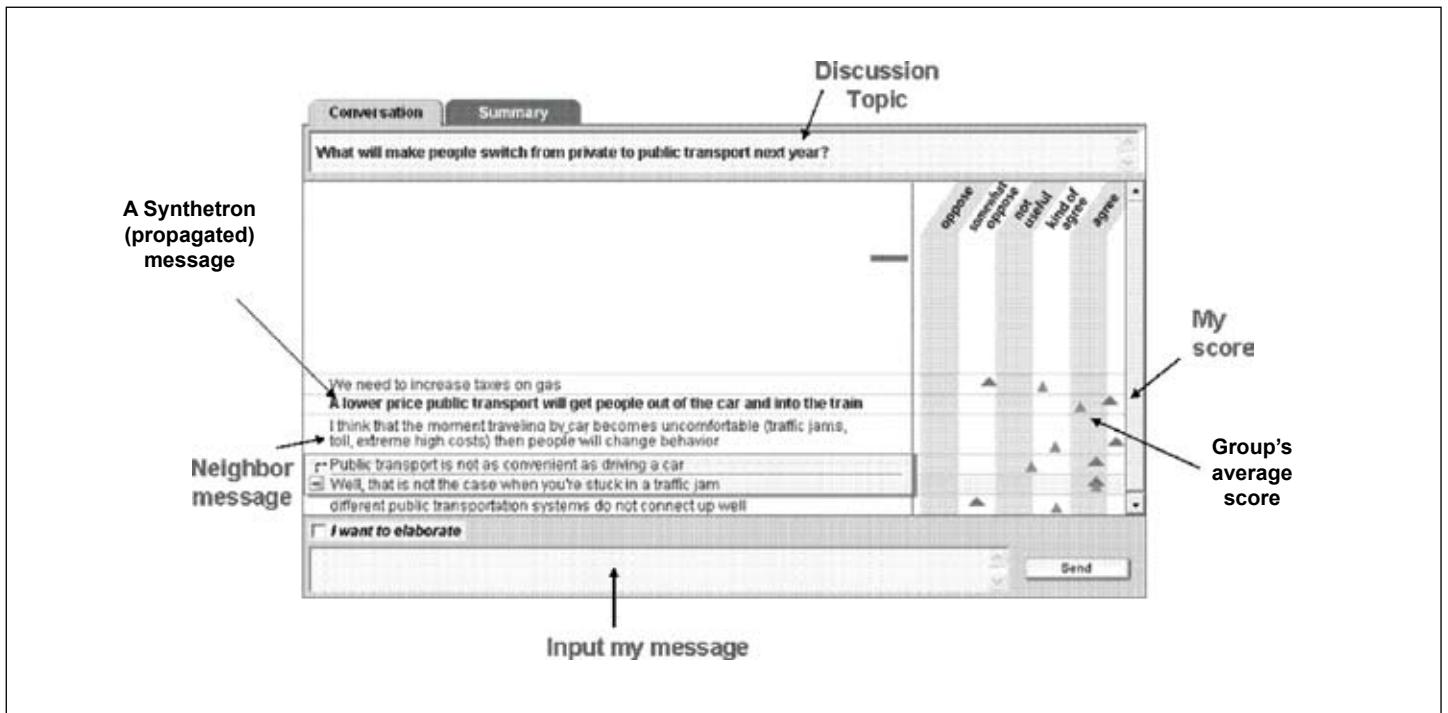
- their own local subgroup (neighbouring oranges).
2. The software helps the group to **aggregate its own synthesis**: During the interaction participants send and receive opinions from neighbouring participants and they validate these opinions by using a simple “one-click” scoring mechanism (on a sliding scale from “oppose” to “strongly agree”). The opinions with a high average score within a local subgroup (neighbouring oranges) become a synthetron: the first level of synthesis. These synthetrons then present themselves to more people (**propagated** to more oranges), and as long as they continue to accumulate support they continue to be seen by more people. In this way,

participants have a very interactive direct discussion with their neighbouring oranges (fellow members of their local subgroup or “basket of oranges”) and are presented with only the most important ideas of the other oranges.

The outcome of a Synthetron discussion is a **structured list of synthetrons** (ideas that have propagated through the basket of oranges) ranked by their level of support. In this way, the organiser has a clear view on what the group ranks as the most important ideas (statements) and knows how many people on average supported each idea or which ideas were rejected or did not receive any support.

A **moderator** plans the feedback session as a series of 8-10 minute topics





The Synthetron user interface

in which the participants discuss with each other the specific issues or questions. The moderator takes the participants through the various topics and facilitates the discussion process by sending messages. Moderation can easily be carried out by co-moderators in different locations. A discussion script with the different questions is the reference document for the moderator(s). It is carefully constructed to focus on the desired insight and bring participants from divergence to convergence. At the same time, the discussion script is a starting point and moderators can always adapt the script as they react to the discussion in real-time.

CASE: HOSPITAL MANAGEMENT IMPROVES STAFF MOTIVATION

The top management of a large hospital complex had gone through a major restructuring and sensed unrest among the staff. To capture the main motivators and de-motivators directly, the management organised a series of 12 segmented Synthetron discussions for employees (doctors, nurses, administrative and cleaning staff). The outcomes helped management to focus on actions that mattered for each segment with consistent and targeted communications.

CASE: TOP TIER CONSULTANCY FINE-TUNES POLICY TO IMPROVE RETENTION OF FEMALE STAFF

A top tier consultancy was concerned about the high staff turnover of its female consultants and felt that company policy did not adequately address diversity. Two Synthetron sessions – one for male employees and one for females – focused on identifying reasons for joining the company, motivators, tension points and when and how tension points became breaking points. The outcome demonstrated that both groups had distinct sets of motivation and retention factors. This output has allowed the organisation to differentiate its policy towards the two groups

WHEN IS SYNTHETRON THE RIGHT SOLUTION?

Synthetron is the right listening tool when confronted with one or more of the following challenges:

- **Reach:** when there is a need to listen to a large dispersed group.
- **Conclusiveness:** when it is important to know which arguments are the most important in the eyes of the participants themselves.
- **Sensitive topics:** when the anonymity

of the participants will help to expose more pertinent ideas.

- **Peer-level interaction:** when different management layers are involved and there is a need to ensure group calibration without the most powerful players hijacking the discussion.
- **Quick feedback:** when a quick response will support the wider process. The parallel processing

in a Synthetron discussion avoids participants having to wait to share their thoughts. Initial output is generated during the meeting and available at the end of the meeting.

- **Engagement:** when there is a desire to give all participants an active role, a sense of empowerment and the scope to influence the outcome.

THE ART OF LISTENING

Purposeful listening requires more than a tool. Careful adherence to five quality conditions is the key to successful listening:

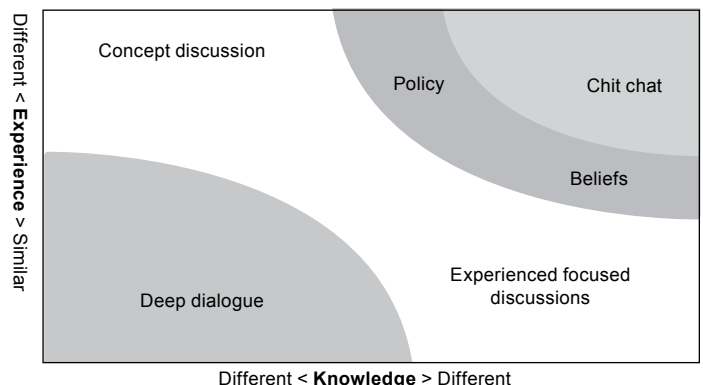
- 1. Hold discussions that matter:** for each of the target groups the discussion needs to be attractive and purposeful. Participants must really feel that their views matter and engage in a conversation that is collaborative, open and reflective – rather than one in which they just offload their own ideas. This is achieved by setting the appropriate tone from the initial invitation, throughout the moderation and in the follow up communication. Choice of words is important in fostering the right mindset. Participants add their thoughts, for example, with a click on the “I want to elaborate” button. In good Synthetron discussions 30-40% of the input builds collaboratively on someone else’s ideas.
- 2. Moderate effectively:** moderating the discussion around a set of open, Socratic-type questions helps the participants to generate amongst themselves those tangible insights that are useful. The sequence of questions in the discussion script needs to help participants to focus,

drill down and reflect, and thus generate useful insights as they go from divergence to convergence.

- 3. Be sincere:** participants will only share their insights if they feel that the organiser is sincerely listening and is ready to provide feedback on the actionable insights. Frank Martin Hein referred to this in his book as having a corporate culture that treats people as subjects rather than objects. The Synthetron discussion can also help managers to better understand the contextual attitude of participants through a Language and Behaviour analysis of the discussion. This gives them insight into the tone of voice, buzzwords and ways of communicating to this target group for maximum impact.
- 4. Consider the composition of your target group beforehand:** do members of the group have the

relevant experience or information/knowledge? It is very important to assess before the discussion whether there are fundamental breakpoints within a group that will influence the dialogue. In such cases, two separate Synthetron discussions may be required, rather than just one. Fundamental breakpoints can be tenure, management level, cultural or professional background, organisational level, or socio-economic level. If this is not considered, the risk is that the dialogue may identify the lowest common denominator rather than the collaborative wisdom.

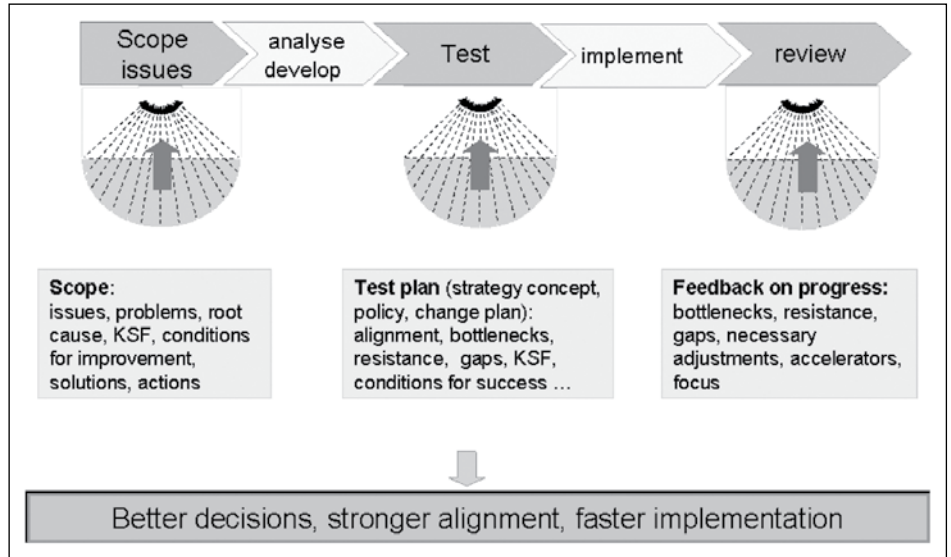
- 5. Listening to groups is not to be confused with group decisions.** With Synthetron discussions, managers **get heuristic input** and very useful insights, but they still have the responsibility to take decisions based on all the information they have at their disposal.



KEY LISTENING POINTS AND THE MANAGEMENT WAVE

There are typically 3 key moments when Synthetron facilitates a management or decision making process. At Synthetron we refer to these moments as the **management wave**:

1. **Scope issues:** listen to the relevant target group to get input on the key issues at stake - before developing a plan or concept.
2. **Test robustness:** test the plan or concept for robustness with key stakeholders.
3. **Review progress:** review the roll-out to test alignment and identify ways to accelerate the process.



Using Synthetron to get targeted feedback or input at these key points

improves decisions and speeds up implementation.

FIRST WAVE:

CASE: MULTINATIONAL UNCOVERS ROOT CAUSES OF EMPLOYEE DISSATISFACTION

A multinational company got actionable insight into problems and root causes that explained some of their employee survey results. Through a set of focus group discussions, segmented by region and management level, the company was able to understand what were and were not the root causes of the problem.

SECOND WAVE:

CASE: ON-LINE RETAILER GAINS MARKET INSIGHT TO SHORTEN ITS DEVELOPMENT CYCLE

An on-line Dutch retailer wanted to listen early on in the process to the new target groups for whom it was developing a dedicated on-line shop. Synthetron was combined with a web conference. After a few introductory slides, participants discussed their online shopping habits via Synthetron. They were then transferred to the current online shop for a 5 minute tour after which they gave feedback on their experience via Synthetron. Subsequently, a new concept was explained to them and they were shown the look and feel of it. Each time they shared their experience in 7 minute Synthetron discussions.

The insights gathered allowed the online retailer to considerably shorten its development cycle.

THIRD WAVE:

CASE: MULTINATIONAL IDENTIFIES ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS TO ENSURE THE SUCCESS OF A NEW IT SYSTEM

A multinational company needed to sense what people felt about the major change programme that had been introduced in different parts of the world to implement standardised ways of working with a new IT system. Through a consistent set of Synthetron discussions the company could track progress against norms and identify insights regarding which elements contributed to success or failure and the potential corrective actions.

FIRST WAVE:

Scope issues at the start of a project, plan or before conducting detailed market research. The insights gained from Synthetron discussions help to define a clear scope of issues, non-issues and the playing field.

Examples include:

- Understand organisational issues before they become problems.
- Prepare for a conference by identifying participants' key issues in advance.
- Accelerate learning for new managers.
- Understand what the real problems are and how to fix them.
- Hold peer level policy discussions as input for board decisions.
- Obtain valuable input from relevant citizen's groups for your plans

Typical questions are :

- "How satisfied or comfortable are you with X - and explain or illustrate why?"
- "What are your major concerns?"
- "What are the problems with X?"
- "What are the root causes of Y"
- "What are the key success factors?"
- "What is a possible solution for Z?"

Outputs: actionable intelligence on key issues, root causes, key success factors, possible solutions, and levers and conditions for improvement.

See case on page 8:

MULTINATIONAL UNCOVERS ROOT CAUSES OF EMPLOYEE DISSATISFACTION

SECOND WAVE:

Test robustness before roll out of a plan, concept or policy. Testing a plan or concept for robustness with the key players is the second phase. This listening has a specific purpose: to identify the level of alignment, the main weak spots, sources of resistance, key levers and (often) to test a hypothesis.

Examples include:

- Test robustness and understanding of a new strategy.
- Build buy-in to new marketing approach among sales force by giving them a chance to influence decision making.
- Reduce market risk by getting key user feedback.
- Find weak spots in alignment and what would need to change to remedy this.

Typical questions are :

- "How convinced are you with X - and share why"
- "What is the key success factor in the implementation?"
- "What are possible bottlenecks we need to overcome?"
- "What do we need to focus on to be successful?"
- "What will make you an advocate of X?"

Outputs: feedback on propositions, measure of alignment, input to resolve bottlenecks, and sending a clear message that top management is listening.

See case on page 8:

ON-LINE RETAILER GAINS MARKET INSIGHT TO SHORTEN ITS DEVELOPMENT CYCLE

THIRD WAVE:

Review progress Complement the KPIs used to follow up implementations with information on what is happening in the hearts and minds of the people involved: their attitude, bottlenecks, desired changes and accelerators.

Examples include:

- Involve the extended project team in a review of progress so far
- Monitor the degree of alignment / resistance to change

Typical questions are :

- "How would you describe your attitude towards the implementation from resistant to enthusiastic - and share why?"
- "By how much have you really changed your way of working as a result of training X? (from not at all to significantly) - and illustrate this with examples"
- "What are the success stories you are proud about?"
- "What are possible bottlenecks?"
- "What do we need to focus on to accelerate progress?"

Outputs: bottom up perceptions of success, surfacing reasons to cooperate with or oppose change and how they might be different.

See case on page 8:

MULTINATIONAL IDENTIFIES ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS TO ENSURE THE SUCCESS OF A NEW IT SYSTEM

CONCLUSION – LISTENING TO LEARN, LEARNING TO LISTEN

With the increasing diversity of lifestyles in today's markets, understanding the customer, understanding stakeholders, understanding employees and capturing the wisdom that is dispersed through organisations is key to the successful implementation and communication of initiatives.

Using new tools to listen more effectively is an approach that can easily be integrated into existing internal communication, providing management with an early warning system and employees with a valuable sense of engagement. Being able to listen to large groups of people, no matter where they are in the world, at very short notice – and obtain actionable output based on what they are thinking – is a valuable addition to every manager's toolkit.

Synthetron is well-placed to help managers and other decision makers capture the collaborative wisdom of employees, customers and other stakeholders in order to take better decisions and implement them faster.

For more information or re-prints of this white paper, please visit:

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Joanne Celens is CEO of Synthetron. Born in Belgium, she has studied business and international relations (KU Leuven and Johns Hopkins University). After an extended internship and stay in Asia, Joanne worked for Royal Dutch Shell. She held various international positions in trading, marketing, strategy and general management over an 18 year career. The experience of leading virtual teams as well as several major change programmes at Shell stimulated Joanne's interest in collaborative listening. In 2003, she left Shell to co-found Synthetron, where she first focused on business development and assumed the role of CEO in 2007.

Catherine Shoulin worked in market research, communications and business strategy for 20 years before setting up her own market research and strategy development business working with the public sector, high street retailers and business-to-business clients. She enjoys bridging worlds and combines her studies of mathematics, market research and colour psychology to support clients in their quest for the truth behind the many decisions made by employees and customers every day. Catherine welcomes the contribution Synthetron makes in this search for truth and has used Synthetron in various applications.



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