

Do Women Make Groups Smarter?



A few weeks ago, I got a chance to catch up with my friend, [Stephanie McAuliffe](#), who heads up the [Organizational Effectiveness program](#) at the [Packard Foundation](#). We were discussing the challenges of collaboration in philanthropy, and she told me an anecdote about some particularly hard-headed individuals who didn't want to listen to anybody. Stephanie happened to note that those individuals were men.

"I'm not trying to make a generalization," she laughed.

"Not to worry," I assured her. "And anyway, it may be fair to make that generalization. Are you familiar with Tom Malone's research?"

[Tom Malone](#) is the director of MIT's [Center for Collective Intelligence](#). A few months ago, he [published research](#) with Carnegie Mellon's [Anita Woolley](#) suggesting that groups with more women exhibited greater collective intelligence. It's not that women have higher IQs than men. (Individual IQ had little correlation with collective intelligence.) It's that women tend to exhibit more social sensitivity than men, and social

sensitivity is a much stronger contributing factor to group intelligence.

Upon hearing about this research, Stephanie asked me what it might suggest about Wikipedia. Wikipedia, after all, is often touted as a classic example of collective intelligence, and yet, [over 80 percent of its contributors are men](#). Is Wikipedia the counterpoint to Woolley and Malone?

I don't think so. There are lots of factors that contribute to collective intelligence. What's remarkable about Wikipedia is the medium (an open, online space where people from all over the world gather, the majority of whom have never met face-to-face) and its scale. It's a great example of collective intelligence, but that doesn't mean it can't do even better.

This was largely the premise of the [open strategic planning process](#) I led for the Wikimedia community from 2009-2010. Sure, Wikipedia is amazing, but how can it do even better? Not surprisingly, one of the goals that the community established was to [increase the diversity of its participants](#), especially women.

Collective intelligence is not a binary thing. Neither is collaboration. People often say, "We're not collaborating," when what they actually mean is, "We're not collaborating *well*." This is a critical distinction. Everybody already knows how to collaborate. The question is how to do it better. Even those who are already doing it well can always improve.