We Are All Actors
Act 2, Scene 5
"Apart Together"

by
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INT. A CAFETERIA

HOLLIS sits at a table eating lunch. WENDY approaches the
table carrying a tray.

                    WENDY
          Hey, Hollis! Is this seat taken?

                    HOLLIS
          Nope. Be my guest.

                    WENDY
          How's it going?

                    HOLLIS
          It's going.

                    WENDY
          A very Monday Monday?

                    HOLLIS
          It's been a month of Mondays.

                    WENDY
          All alike, or all different?

                    HOLLIS
          It's the same basic problem over
          and over again - getting people to
          work together.

                    WENDY
          People problems?

                    HOLLIS
          I don't think so, actually. I
          think it's tool problems.

                    WENDY
          Really?

                    HOLLIS
          Yeah. We're trying to coordinate a
          bunch of comments on a new stem
          cell research bill, but it's really
          hard.

                    WENDY
          What makes it hard?

                    HOLLIS
          Lots of things. For example, we
          have to do a lot of rewriting.

                    WENDY
          Why, are people not being clear?

                    HOLLIS
          No; they're being clear. It's just
          that we're never all together in
          the same room, so we end up doing
          things in writing that we'd do by
          talking around the table before we
          write - if we were all working for
          the same organization in the same
          place.

                    WENDY
          Oh, so, like, one person writes
          something down and a bunch of
          people propose changes and the
          editor has to pick which changes to
          apply?

                    HOLLIS
          Not quite. To start with there's
          no editor.

WENDY takes her plate and silverware off her tray and puts
the tray off to one side of the table.

                    WENDY
          Why not?

                    HOLLIS
          Because then we'd have to argue
          about who'd be the editor.

                    WENDY
          Wouldn't it be worth having the
          argument?

                    HOLLIS
          Only if the argument ended. In
          this case it's really important
          that all the participants be on an
          equal footing - so the only way we
          could do it would be to hire a
          neutral professional editor. But
          that wouldn't really solve the
          problem either, because it's not
          really an editing problem, it's a
          consensus problem.

                    WENDY
          Oh, so you're using writing tools
          to negotiate?

                    HOLLIS
          You know, I never thought of it
          exactly that way, but you're right.

                    WENDY
          So you want a tool that supports
          things like developing options,
          taking straw polls - stuff like
          that?

                    HOLLIS
          I think so but I'm not sure,
          because I've only seen it work
          badly - I've never seen it work
          well.

HOLLIS takes a drink of his coffee.

                    WENDY
          What does your process for working
          on the document look like?

                    HOLLIS
          That's another problem, actually -
          we really haven't all agreed on the
          process.

                    WENDY
          Why not just start by establishing
          the agreed-on facts?

                    HOLLIS
          That's EXACTLY what we tried to do.
          But even that turned out to be
          pretty hard. We immediately
          started arguing about facts.

                    WENDY
          Aren't those easy arguments to
          settle?

                    HOLLIS
          No, not really. We discovered
          pretty quickly that we needed good
          tools for citation and for
          establishing the authority of the
          references we cite.

                    WENDY
          But we already have databases of
          research reports and stuff.

                    HOLLIS
We do, and some other organizations
do too. But we don't all have
access to the same databases, and
some of the database subscriptions
are really expensive so not
everyone can use them. Plus it's
hard for me to get information
about how reliable a reference
source is if I've never heard of
the source before.

                    WENDY
So you need something like a
register of authorities?

                    HOLLIS
Maybe something like a reputation
system would be good. Like with
researcher bios and vitas and
awards and stuff. And with
organizations' staff experience and
so on. Can you pass me the salt?

                    WENDY
Sure.

WENDY passes HOLLIS the salt and pepper shakers

                    WENDY
I'm guessing a reputation system
wouldn't solve all your problems,
right?

                    HOLLIS
Right. For example, we keep
thinking we're getting close to the
end and then another big issue will
blow up.

                    WENDY
You mean with new text?

                    HOLLIS
No, even with old stuff. The
problem is we don't really have a
way to flag issues, so we just kind
of work on the hottest issue first,
but we don't put together a
complete issues list so we can't
really tell how much work is left
at any point.

                    WENDY
Is there a problem with putting
together an issues list?

                    HOLLIS
Sort of. To start with, of course,
new issues keep getting generated
by text changes we make to fix old
issues. But there's another
problem too - some things are
issues for only a few participants,
like maybe organizations from a
particular state or region. But
they're really serious for those
organizations - and the rest of the
group gets held up waiting for a
subgroup to finish arguing. Plus
it's sometimes hard to tell what
issues people in a particular
region or business sector need to
worry about, so we can't even be
sure who needs to be included in a
particular discussion. And even
that's just the tip of the iceberg.

                    WENDY
What's the rest of the iceberg?

                    HOLLIS
We're trying to hit a moving
target. The legislation we're
commenting on keeps changing.
We're at a real disadvantage
against smaller, more focused
groups.

                    WENDY
Because they don't have to go
through any kind of consensus
process so they can react faster?

                    HOLLIS
Right. And since they can make
decisions faster they can start
lobbying before we've decided what
we want to ask for.

                    WENDY
So the text changes and you have to
start the consensus process over
again.

                    HOLLIS
Well, we don't have to completely
start over, but we have new issues
we have to deal with, so it does
slow us down.

                    WENDY
I'm gonna get dessert in a minute.
Are there any other problems?

                    HOLLIS
Yes, actually, there's one more big
problem.

                    WENDY
Do tell.

                    HOLLIS
It's hard to figure out who we need
to argue with.

                    WENDY
Why?

                    HOLLIS
Because our tools aren't all that
good at keeping track of the
discussions that led to consensus
and who took what position.

                    WENDY
Oh, so you end up having the same
arguments over and over?

                    HOLLIS
Yes, and that's frustrating. But
even before we get to consensus,
it's sometimes hard to tell who
feels strongest about a particular
pargraph, so we don't really know
who we have to convince to make a
change.

                    WENDY
And that works both ways, right -
people don't know that they need to
come to us to ask for changes?

                    HOLLIS
Right. And there really isn't a
good way for us to link rationale
and history to what we've written.

                    WENDY
Well, it certainly sounds like
better tools would make your life
easier. There's lots of talk about
"Collaboration Tools" in the IT
trade press right now. Don't any
of them do what you want?

                    HOLLIS
Not out-of-the-box; you need to
customize them to get the features
you want. Plus a lot of these
tools are pretty expensive, and a
lot of the nonprofits we work with
can't afford them.

                    WENDY
I hear chocolate chip cookies
calling, Hollis. What are you
going to do?

                    HOLLIS
I'm not sure yet. But I'm going to
look around to see if there's
something we could use.