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[Leave A Trail: Stigmergy and Effective Large Group Collaboration](#)

One of the challenges with large group collaboration is keeping track of what others are doing. With a small group, the project manager or group leader can take on the responsibility of keeping others informed. If it's a single organization, you can theoretically [mandate](#) a communication strategy from above, although in reality, this doesn't work effectively when the organization is large and diverse. For large-scale collaboration between different groups, neither of these are realistic options. [\(KCB\)](#)

How can large groups communicate most effectively? The answer is [stigmergy](#), a term [Chris Dent](#) first introduced to me about four years ago. Stigmergy is a form of indirect communication where organisms react to signs left by others. Ants communicate by stigmergy. They leave a trail of pheromones that other ants pick up and react to. Stigmergy — not centralized command-and-control — is responsible for those amazing anthills. [\(KCC\)](#)

There is an equivalent pattern in effective large group collaboration: [Leave A Trail](#). I've called this pattern [Think Out Loud](#) and [Visible Pulse](#) in the past, but I like "[Leave A Trail](#)" better, because of its association with stigmergy. (Obligatory karma reference: I first [heard this name](#) from [Peter Kaminski](#), who in turn credits [Chris Messina](#) for explaining it as a principle of [Bar Camp](#).) [MGTaylor](#) calls this pattern Ship Product and often describes it in the context of [Stuart Kauffman](#)'s work and [patch theory](#). [\(KCD\)](#)

The idea is simple. When you work, leave an artifact somewhere where others can find it. An artifact doesn't have to be comprehensive; in fact, it's often better when it isn't. A brief meeting summary is usually more useful than a full transcript. A brief summary with links to specific instances in the transcript is even more useful. [\(KCE\)](#)

When you [Leave A Trail](#), you're communicating to whomever wants to listen, which may effect how you express yourself. This can be disconcerting to some. People often point to the lack of response as a sign that tools like online forums, blogs, or Wikis aren't working. That's not necessarily the case. There may be a whole slew of [lurkers](#) who are [reacting to the signs](#) that you are leaving. (That said, Immediate Feedback is also an important pattern in Online Communities.) [\(KCF\)](#)

This can also be difficult when determining what kind of trail to leave. Because you don't know who will be reacting to your signs, you can't target them. The solution is to [Scratch Your Own Itch](#). [\(KCG\)](#)

Emergence can't happen without [Leave A Trail](#). However, [Leave A Trail](#) is just one of many conditions for emergence. You can't dictate whether emergence will happen, and when it does, you can't control what actually emerges. The best you can do is create conditions for emergence and hope that good things happen. This is disconcerting to many, and folks often react by trying to assert more control,

which makes things worse. ([KCH](#))

[Leave A Trail](#) and other principles are helpful in designing community spaces. For example, if you are trying to integrate blogs or Wikis into a community's practice, the best way to do that is to apply the tool in such a way that it scratches an individual's itch while also leaving a trail. For example, many good project leaders are good at doing meeting summaries. Instead of having them email a small subset of individuals, have them email a public, archived mailing list. Better yet, have them blog their summaries and email links to the blog. You're not significantly changing individual behavior in these situations, but you are significantly improving your chances for large-scale collaboration. ([KCI](#))

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