

Wisdom, Leadership, Governance & (implicitly) The Future

by Professor Bruce Lloyd

(How many are interested in Wisdom?)

Basically the paper will be exploring some of the challenges of trying to operationalise Futures ideas within our organizations. I will be arguing that Knowledge (or more strictly information) has little value without Wisdom. But what does that mean? And what do we need to do about it? Also why the link between Leadership and Wisdom is critical for better decision-making about producing a better future for us all.

Spend a few minutes briefly relating **Wisdom** to 6 other words:

Power/ Responsibility/ Strategy/ Leadership / Dialogue & Governance.

and then focuses on 5 core issues I think are important. More sharing some ideas, I believe, don't get the attention they deserve, rather than a research paper that provides detailed answers.

But first How I got into it ... Involved in **Strategy** in early '90's. Moved onto Learning focus in evolved in late 90's into a focus on **Knowledge Management** But, although a notable few exceptions, little discussion of Wisdom, despite being brought up on the traditional Data/Information/Knowledge/ Wisdom pyramid – more of that later.

Also involves in a wide range of **Futures** activities in the run up to the new Millennium a few years ago ... (including The Millennium Project) But this focus on the future tended to be very technologically driven, and gave little attention to what we had really learned over the past centuries that was important to pass on to future generations (ie **Wisdom** again.) An attempt to fill that gap lead to a project ('Messages for the New Millennium') on the World Future Society website.

And -- **Where I am coming from:** Not a classical education Science/ Technology / Business and 25 years in industry & finance before joining the academic world in 1990.

No **religious agenda** >>> positive agnostic (focusing on asking questions ...)

Overall a **strategy** concern with understanding what works and how it can work better ... recognizing that 'better' is a values driven word ...

So what are the 5 issues:

Need to understand the relationship between **Power & Responsibility** on one hand plenty on **Power** but little on **Responsibility** And on the other plenty on **Responsibility** but little on **Power**.

Power is the ability to make things happen.

Responsibility is about in whose interests are we making things happen.

(2X2 - **Power <> Responsibility** box) Vital to consider **Power & Responsibility** together. – and useful to deal with Rights and Responsibilities together.

There appears to be a widespread '**Knowledge is Power**' culture ... but the key to effective use of management techniques needs a sharing knowledge culture ...

Bullying / Stress / Racism / Sexism / Corruption is essentially about the abuse of **Power**, or lack of a **Responsibility** approach.

Problems over **Language use** ... Corridors of **Power** – **Power** struggles - Lusting after **Power**?

Also interesting to explore what **Power/Responsibility** means in different languages.

Change >>>> Progress Vast majority of change top down driven ...but if that not seen to be **Responsibility** driven not likely to be effective Trust (&Values) are the key to getting agreement on what is defined as progress. Unless **Power & Change** is **Responsibility** driven

(&seen to be) it will sooner rather than later destroy the organization or society, as well as the individual. Problems with concept of Empowerment.

But the biggest challenge we all have is to attempt to control power driven (ie over self-focused) individuals before they destroy our organizations

2. Leadership is not about people with **Power**, it is about how that **Power** is used – that is in whose interests is it used – in other words it is about values

Basically, **Leadership (/Wise Leadership)** is 'The **well informed, Responsible** use of **Power**'. Effective leadership develops a sharing culture (and needs to walk the talk.) It is important to ask people what they think is going on, because too often those at the top are cut off from what people further down the organization really think & feel, and that critically influences their level of commitment & that is invariably values related, rather than just about technical competencies. Back to '**Wise Leadership** as the well informed, **Responsible** use of **Power**' ... Understanding this is concept critical for two reasons ... First a preoccupation with self interested driven **Power** will ultimately destroy organizations and societies ... as well as individuals ...but equally important, it is only if those with **Power** are perceived to be using it **Responsibly** (ie in every ones interest) that they will have a sharing knowledge culture and as a result have any chance of being classified as 'well informed' All this is critical to the development of a leadership and sound decision-making, but it is all too often ignored.

So the further up an organization you go the more **Responsible** people should be ...but is this what we find in practice. Studies find that people want to be *inspired* by their leaders, but they rarely ask what it is that they mean by 'inspirational' ...is that because they don't want to know the answer is values related? Also research into whether people feel that the next layer up helps them to do their job, find the answer is all too often NO!

(Perhaps scope for developing a SOFI type index covering 'Leadership Performance Indicator for Heads of State' (& other so-called leaders of any organization.)

3. 1000's of books and other publications on Leadership but very few mention **Wisdom**?

Why is **Wisdom** relevant? What do we mean by **Wisdom**? ...

Reliable, useful, information that includes a values dimension that work, it is about people & relationships that work in the long term for the benefit of everyone. Wikipedia definition ...

I believe it is important to rehabilitate the word/concept.

But why (with a few notable exceptions) is **Wisdom** generally ignored in the management/ KM/ Leadership literature; despite being at the top of the Data/Information/Knowledge/Wisdom pyramid – this is not the time to go into detail on how that basically mechanistic pyramid has to be redefined But, in essence, it is Values/**Wisdom** that determine what we want to do, which then determines the information we need. In other words, again, **Wisdom/Values** are critical.

Knowledge is the use of information, but it is our values (often packaged as Wisdom) that determines whether or not that information is put to good use.

It is also important to understand how the word **Wisdom** has been misused and the why it has been relatively ignored in recent years ...

On one hand religion tended to use it as an absolute concept ... On the other hand the widespread use of the phrase 'Commonly held **Wisdom**' is usually used to deride the validity of a statement, but these statements are invariably just referring to the reliability (or unreliability) of information, where there is no values /personal dimension ... It is important to recognise that while **Wisdom** is reliable, useful, information, that does not mean that all reliable, useful information is **Wisdom**. Of course, recycling **Wisdom** is easy ...Being **Wise**, that is putting it into practice is what is important ... and that is the difficult bit ...

Personally I have found it surprising that the extensive literature that we now have on **Emotional Intelligence** and much of the growing literature emphasizing the importance of values, rarely links into the literature on **Wisdom**.

In essence, we need to move from the widely discussed concept of a Knowledge Economy/ Knowledge Society to a more explicit values driven agenda ... which could be repackaged as the **Wise Society/ Wise Economy**. It is also important to recognise that **Wisdom** is probably the most sustainable body of information ... yet **Wisdom** also appears to get relatively little attention in literature on sustainability issues ...

4rd issue I want to emphasise is the importance of Dialogue ... I argue that the quality of the decisions taken in our organisations (& in our lives in general) and our organizational strategy, depends critically on the quality of the conversations that we all hold ... This is not just about helping us to be well informed, but we need to be able to hold positive conversations about critical issues over the values agenda, which ultimately determine our priorities and decisions Unfortunately this is a subject that is generally ignored in strategy textbooks and even in the educational system as a whole.

5th Why is all this related to Governance? In essence Governance is an attempt to control the abuse of **Power**. If we were all more **Responsible** we would all need fewer rules and regulations. If this dimension is not focused on there is acute risk of a vicious circle of more and more regulation, where the only winners are the lawyers.

I could easily go into these areas in much more detail. But I just want to draw a few key conclusions on how these issues link together, so that we can have plenty of time to discuss them.

First, I believe that **Wisdom** literature, can be incredibly relevant and practical for us as individuals, as well as within our organisations and society as a whole. Perhaps it is all very obvious, but in my view the topic rarely gets the attention it deserves And unfortunately too many academic studies on **Wisdom** in philosophy are virtually unreadable.

My overall argument is that, in essence, **Wisdom** literature helps us:

- Understand what we mean by **Good Leadership**, which is also the same as **Wise Leadership** and that it is basically about how to put values into practice for the benefits of us all.
- Why it is important to understand the **Power <> Responsibility** relationships.
- Why we need to recognise the importance of trying to improve the quality of **Dialogue**.
- Why improving **Governance** depends on us behaving more **Responsibly** in our relations with each other. Without that underlying approach all the rules and regulations will be a waste of time.

A final comment. Everyone is interested in **Wisdom** But how many have ever put the word into Google? Over 100m pages -- but on the first screen is one site called **The Wisdom Page**, which is full of incredible valuable insights into what makes people, organisations and society work ... Do put the word **Wisdom** into Wikipedia ... we all need to take our search for **Wisdom** (in theory and practice) much more seriously ...

Leadership is not about technical issues ... it is critically dependent on getting people work well together; it is about relationships about people

In the end it is the **Wise** use of information that gives it value. In other words it our values that we really value, and I strongly believe that **Wisdom** can really help us understand how to make those relationships work better for us all over the long term.

Relevant 'Wisdom' on Quotations:

On Wisdom

- **“Data is not information. Information is not knowledge. Knowledge is not understanding. Understanding is not Wisdom.”**
(Anon)
- **“ The Function of Wisdom is to discriminate between good and evil”**
(Marcus Tullius Cicero)
- **“Knowledge is of no value unless you put it into practice.”**
(Anton Chekhov (1860-1904))
- **“Wisdom is the power that enables us to use our knowledge for the benefit of ourselves and others.”** (Thomas J. Watson)
- **“The more knowledge we have the more wisdom we need to ensure that it is used well.”** (Anon)
- **“The price of greatness is responsibility”** Winston Churchill,
(‘A great position entails great responsibility’ Anon (proverb); ‘With great power comes great responsibility’, Peter Parker)
- **“Freedom is not the last word. Freedom is only part of the story and half of the truth. The positive aspect of freedom is responsibility.”** Frankl, Viktor
- **“Teach your kids responsibility early”** Anon

On Governance

- **“ Wise people though all laws were abolished would lead the same life.”**
(Aristophanes)
(“The Higher standards of our behaviour the less we need rules and regulations”)
“If you have ten thousand regulations you destroy all respect for the law.”
Winston Churchill,
- **(“The more laws, the less justice.”** German proverb)
(... “I am in little doubt that, in the broadest sense, the proliferation of rules and rights makes people over cautious, stifles initiative and acts as a brake on creative thinking” Prince Charles letter to Lord Chancellor, Times 2 March 18 March 2006)
- **“No matter how wonderful your corporate governance processes, if you can’t trust your people then you are at risk.”** Sir Derek Higgs
- **“One of the reasons we have so much regulation because we cannot rely on people stopping to think about what’s right.”** Michael Kirkwood
- **“Tzu-kung asked: ‘Is there a single word which can be a guide to conduct throughout one’s life? The Master said: ‘It is perhaps the word ‘shu.’ Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.”** Confucius

South African Sources

- **"A Bill of Rights is an important statement about the nature of power relations in any society."**
Nelson Mandela, (The ANC has had a Bill of Rights since 1923)
- **"As a leader ... I have always endeavoured to listen to what each and every person in a discussion had to say before venturing my own opinion. Often times, my own opinion will simply represent a consensus of what I heard in the discussion. I always remember the axiom: a leader is like a shepherd. Their stay behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, where upon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind."**
Nelson Mandela,
- **"Conflict threatens not only the gains we have made but also our collective future."**
Nelson Mandela,
- **"I have become more convinced than ever that the real makers of history are the ordinary men and women of our country; their participation in every decision about the future is the only guarantee of true democracy and freedom."**
Nelson Mandela,
- **"The purpose of studying history is not to deride human action, not to weep over it or to hate it, but to understand it -- and then to learn from it as we contemplate our future."**
Nelson Mandela,
- **"The spirit of *ubuntu*, that profound African sense that we are human only through the humanity of other human beings -- is not a parochial phenomenon, but has added globally to our common search for a better world."**
Nelson Mandela,
- **"This has placed a great responsibility on my shoulders."**
Nelson Mandela, (On being President of South Africa)
- **"Concern for others is the best form of self interest"** Desmond Tutu,
- **"When you look at a massive problem it is good to remember about eating an elephant. There is only one way to eat it; one piece at a time. The sea is vast but the sea is just drops of water and each drop counts."**
Desmond Tutu.

If we don't learn from the past, particularly that generally packaged as **Wisdom**, it is very unlikely that all our Futures thinking will result in a better future for us all.