

# Mindfulness, Wisdom and Leadership

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## ***Abstract***

*There is growing evidence of the fact that humankind is very close to the edge of the deep abyss. Lack of wisdom among corporate and state leadership is probably one of the most important reason why we are in such a threatened situation. In this paper, wisdom as a critical leadership trait and wisdom development according to a 4-dimensional model is presented and discussed together with mindfulness as a contemplative way to post-conventional and even trans-conventional level of human development. Wise leadership based on Western scientific tradition and Eastern philosophical tradition is proposed as a new leadership model that is needed if we want to successfully respond to our current global crises.*

## **1. Introduction**

Despite the fact that we are living in the so-called knowledge society, we are frequently witnessing the destructive and immoral conduct of leaders. Even if modern organizational and political leaders seem to be well educated and intelligent by conventional measures, they fail to act properly or, even more so, wisely. It seems that their desire for power, fame, money or sex dominates over the desire to contribute to the general well-being of society (i.e. common good). The new paradigms from the field of leadership theory, which otherwise lead to important discoveries about the functioning of individuals and organizations as complex adaptive systems, cannot in practice alter this harmful behavior.

The complexity of the threats confronting modern humankind demands leaders who have advanced cognitive, social, emotional, and moral competencies. Among other things, such leaders need to show a transcendental higher purpose exposing unresolved and disturbing human right problem; untangling false interpretations of the world; and breaking out of conventional solutions. Based on the Greek philosophical tradition, man as a teleological being needs to strive for *eudaimonia* ("true" happiness or flourishing). Flourishing that is experienced as self and collective actualization represents the greatest good and ultimate goal of human life. Flourishing is desired for its own sake and everything else is done or desired for the sake of flourishing. In order to attain flourishing it is necessary to develop and live in harmony with the virtues, especially wisdom. Wisdom has a special place among virtues as it enables us to balance among different virtues. In our modern society, wisdom helps leaders to simultaneously create wealth, be ethical, achieve personal happiness (i.e.,

flourishing) and contribute to the common good in short and long term.

Importance of wisdom for modern organizations is well presented by different researchers (e.g., Cameron, 2003; Korac-Kakabadse, Korac-Kakabadse, & Kouzmin, 2001; Mick, Bateman, & Lutz, 2009). Cameron (2003) in his work has demonstrated that organizations which employ virtuous (i.e., wise) people, especially in leadership positions, achieve better financial results in comparison with other organizations in the same branch, and that they are also more successful according to various objective and subjective measures of productivity, quality and commitment to the organization. However not a full agreement exists about the relationship between leadership and wisdom. Some are skeptical about the relevance of wisdom to business leadership. For example, Staudinger & Glück (2011) assert that “although wisdom may be a highly desirable quality for those individuals who steer the fates of our modern society and economy, there are some systematic reasons (e.g., strong interests such as the search for power or the optimization of profit) why wisdom, in the strict sense ... may be a rare quality of those who are successful enough to reach and maintain leadership positions” (p. 234). They point out the inconclusive empirical results about the relationship between leadership and traits such as intelligence, adjustment, extraversion, conscientiousness, openness to experience, dominance, and self-efficacy. Furthermore, important facets of wisdom such as emotional complexity, balance, self-transcendence, and benevolent values “are typical of some but certainly not all successful leaders” (p. 234). They suggest instead a situational contingency model of leadership that assumes that “the efficiency of a leadership style depends on the demands of the situation, for instance, on features of the organizational context” (p. 235). This approach is similar to the sense-making perspective adopted by Cooperrider, Srivastva & Vaill (1998), Weick (1998), Beyer & Niño who “share the conviction that organizational wisdom is not a transcendent attribute but rather a sensemaking response to temporality, to emergent processes, to specific conditions and opportunities, and to organizational culture” (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1998, p. 5). These theorists generally do not see wisdom as a permanent trait: it is “a dynamic process of subtle judging and knowing that must always be readjusted, restructured, and rebuilt” (p. 5). Other theorists as Sternberg (2003), and McKenna, Rooney & Boal (2009) argue that wise leaders “cut through” the ambiguity and complexity of “constant change, information overload, competing and contradictory explanations of problems, seemingly incommensurable commercial and ethical demands, and so on” (p.181). They claim that extant theories of transformational, charismatic, spiritual and authentic leadership cannot adequately explain how leaders deal with that complexity. Leaders need wisdom as an emergent phenomenon of integration among high developed cognitive, conative, moral, and affective capacities.

Wisdom as any other virtue does not come by fortune, but by one's own efforts. Wisdom is not a capacity that we are born with. Rather, we must develop it through deliberate practice,

self-reflection and contemplation. With deliberate practice we consciously seek to improve ourselves by carefully assessing our performance, obtaining feedback and mentoring, and sustaining these efforts over time (Walsh, 2012). For this reason many people do not aspire to be wise and they are quite happy to concentrate to here and now without need to seek insights within them (Achenbaum, 2004) or to go beyond “automation conformity” (Erich Fromm). Wisdom develops as a result of the interaction between the individual and his/her environment that promotes or inhibits the acquisition of needed experiences and thinking skills. Under supportive conditions and with proper use of contemplative disciplines leaders can perform at their best that for some of them means to live meaningfully, wisely, and compassionately. Wisdom depends on the development stage reached by an individual as well as on the range of states of consciousness he or she can access. Transpersonal state of consciousness can culminate in a direct insight into reality, which represents the highest level of wisdom.

The rest of the paper will try to bring some answers to the following essential questions: What is wisdom? Is wisdom a multidimensional or one-dimensional concept? How is wisdom related to leadership? How can wisdom be developed and how it relates to mindfulness? Further, this paper will present what kind of implications these answers have for leadership theory development.

## **2. Wisdom as a Multi-dimensional Concept**

Attempts to define wisdom date back as far as the Mesopotamian records of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> millennia BC, and later, up till the beginning of the Christian era, they were also to be found in Egyptian texts, Confucianism, Buddhism, the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and up to the records of the Greek philosophers. In spite of the numerous definitions of wisdom we still do not have a uniform definition (Ardelt, 2005).

Malan and Kriger (1998) conceive wisdom as being the “ability to grasp the significance of many often contradictory signals and stimuli and to interpret them in a complete and integrative manner. To learn from them and act according to them.” Vaill (1998) denotes wisdom as the way of reflecting and living in constantly changing situations, together with the open questions, and of being able to act wisely with regard to them. This view is supported by Weick (1998) with his construct of wisdom as the ability to strike the balance between self-confidence and doubt. More thoroughly elaborated is Sternberg's definition of wisdom. This denotes wisdom as the exercise of successful intelligence and creativity, with the intermediation of values, in order to attain general welfare by striking a balance between intrapersonal, interpersonal and extrapersonal interests, both in short- and long-term. All these in order to enable the individual to maintain a balance among adjusting to the existing environment, changing therein, and selecting a new environment (Sternberg, 2003).

Wisdom is closely linked to knowledge. Thus Schwaninger (2006) understands wisdom as knowledge and understanding of a higher quality, which contains both an ethical and an aesthetic extension. Wisdom, however, is not just knowledge. Being wise means that somebody knows what he/she knows and does not know, what it is possible to know, and what it is not possible to know at a given time and place (Sternberg, 2003). Furthermore, he/she is also able and willing to use the appropriate knowledge in accordance with the needs of all who will feel the consequences of his/her action. The wise person does not merely possess knowledge as a justified true belief (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), but is also capable and willing of using this knowledge in a way which, considering the given circumstances, is the most appropriate in relation to common good.

In a similar way, Beck (1999) stresses that wisdom consists of knowledge (understanding truth) and action (doing good). To know what is right, yet not to do it, or to do what is right without knowing that it is right – that is not wisdom. It is merely a type of passive understanding, or sheer luck (Bierly, Kessler, & Christensen, 2000). A comparable standpoint is taken by McClean and Staughton (1996), who assert that knowledge means having the right answers, while wisdom means asking the appropriate questions, and also by Rothberg (1993), who defines wisdom as appropriate acting, and Ackoff (1996: 29), who states that wisdom is “the ability to comprehend and evaluate the long-term consequences of behavior”. Similarly, Ardelt (2004) notes that wisdom, separated from an actual person, represents merely a form of explicit theoretical knowledge, which may otherwise have great intellectual value, although it still remains no more than knowledge until some individual activates the wisdom embodied in that knowledge.

From the numerous definitions, it is evident that cognitive capacities understood as knowledge, especially tacit knowledge, and an ability to see a holistic picture of a given task form an important part of wisdom, though not an exclusive part. Bellinger, Castro, and Mills (2004: 2) claim that “wisdom requires that someone has a soul, since this is to be found both in the heart and in the mind.” Wisdom, therefore, is not only cognition, but also emotional maturity (Courtney, 2001) and the readiness to put wisdom into practice. Aristotle (1998: 38) comments that emotions “may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue”. The same point is elaborated by Sternberg (2001) who says that one cannot be wise and at the same time impulsive or mindless in one's judgments.

Hence, the wisdom of the individual should not be judged through the knowledge, which that person masters, but rather through his/her personal qualities which are manifested through action. Wisdom represents the final stage in the individual's personal development, which includes cognitive, conative, moral and affective element or lines of development

(Wilber, 2006). Similar definition is given by Birren and Fisher (1990: 326):

*“Wisdom is the integration of the affective, conative, and cognitive aspects of human abilities in response to life tasks and problems. Wisdom is a balance between the opposing valences of intense emotion and detachment, action and inaction, and knowledge and doubts.”*

Beside affective, conative, and cognitive aspects of wisdom we need to consider also the moral dimension. As Aristotle argues “... it is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom, nor practically wise without moral virtue” (1998: 158). The same view is expressed by Maak and Pless (2006, p. 105) as: “While many leaders have excellent cognitive and intellectual capacities, it is moral character and relational intelligence that distinguishes good from great – as responsible leaders”.

Within the context of the proposed model of wisdom development, individuals progress from the lowest to the highest level of development along each of the four dimensions. The model presupposes that the simultaneous presence of metasytematic level of the cognitive, affective, conative, and moral development of the individual is a necessary condition for attaining wisdom. The proposed model assumes that various developmental lines are only loosely linked and can therefore develop unevenly. A person can exhibit a developmental imbalance with a high level of development on one dimension and low on others. Yet a metasytematic level of development of all four human qualities is essential for wisdom. It can happen that a person who has not yet achieved a proper level of development along all four-development lines shows wisdom but this is to be understood as a result of coincidences or a flash of intuitive apprehension and not an enduring human trait.

### **3. 4-Dimensional Model of Wisdom**

Assuming that perfect wisdom is never achieved any more than perfect intelligence is, we propose a developmental model along four dimensions: cognitive, affective, conative, and moral. Within the model the three stages of development along the four dimensions can be described as:

1. *Formal stage*, in which the person is capable of abstract reasoning even if he is not able to comprehend fully important objective and subjective (i.e. emotional and social) characteristics in specific circumstances. The individual makes decisions and takes action mostly in response to their urgent psychophysical needs. The image of the world for a person at this level of development is above all black-and-white, or bipolar, with only one pole being the right one in the circumstances at hand. Opinions are stated categorically, with no uncertainty or doubts, and complex problems are simplified to

such an extent that it is possible to choose between only a few clearly defined and structured alternatives.

2. *Systematic stage*, in which the person understands the social rules, expectations, agreements and their subtleties. At this level of development, a person acts appropriately with regard to the accepted social rules. However the person is still subjected to the right/wrong vision of the world even if able to view the options and decisions as depending to situational factors and susceptible to being re-evaluated.
3. *Metasystematic stage*, in which the person is aware that social life is composed of complex interactive processes that produce paradoxes, which cannot be resolved but only managed. The individual is capable of reaching beyond the limitations of specific cultural-historical space and of behaving in conformity with the general moral principles, even if this is not in accordance with the conventional moral principles (Treviño, 1992). At this level of development a person is capable to simultaneously handle contradictory and ambiguous ideas, feelings, desires and images.

Now consider each of the four dimensions more closely.

### ***The Individual's Cognitive Development***

Cognitive capacities are considered to be the individual's ability to acquire, preserve, manipulate, analyze, and interpret information, which in the final phase is expressed as a context and time-appropriate decision (Stonehouse and Pemberton, 1999). Based on Piaget's (1971) theory, cognitive development is related to an individual's capacity for adaptive behavior. During the process of cognitive development, the individual changes, or supplements their mental models, which in general enables that person to adjust to diverse circumstances (to master greater diversity), to act more reliably, or more predictably, and altogether more robustly in dealing with the increasing changes in their environment. This neo-Piagetian notion of cognitive development has been incorporated in wisdom research for some time and is relatively uncontested (Labouvie-Vief, 1990; Staudinger and Glück, 2011, pp. 223-4). They emphasize that mastering formal-logical operations does not represent full cognitive development. Rather, in the postformal cognitive stage one has to deal with epistemological contestation of truths, uncertainty, contradiction, and paradox (Baltes and Staudinger, 2000; Sternberg, 2003).

We can distinguish three levels of individual cognitive development:

1. At the formal stage, the individual is cognitively capable of shaping and understanding only one aspect of any matter. Because these persons understand every matter merely from their personal uniform viewpoint, which is based on a black-and-white conception



of the world, they are most of the time not capable of realizing that other viewpoints also exist. Decisions are based primarily on the anticipated short-term advantages by simplifying the complexity of the matter in hand.

2. At the *systematic stage*, the individual is aware that different standpoints exist, and perceives knowledge and values as relativistic and context dependent. Consequently, from among the different standpoints, the individual either works out a compromise or else reactively responds to the negative consequences that result from persisting in one standpoint. The person is searching for a balance while going through the diverse aspects of the matter.
3. At the *metasystematic stage*, the individual at the same time unites the diverse viewpoints on the matter and knows that each of these has its own limitations (i.e., the capacity for paradoxical reflection or dialectic thinking). The individual is aware of the fact that the people with whom s/he is in social relationships may hold different viewpoints from their own, and that these viewpoints are as real for other individuals as their own viewpoint is for him/her (i.e. the multiple realities of life). This individual is capable of understanding and accepting the benefits and disadvantages of diverse viewpoints, and hence is able to combine these differing viewpoints into the best possible coherent whole in order to come closer to whatever the reality of the task at hand is. Beside that, the individual is able to deal with inconsistency and imperfection of the information at hand.

### ***The Individual's Conative Development***

Conation, which could also be considered agentive self-control or willpower, indicates the commitment of the individual towards achieving a particular goal (Ghoshal and Bruch, 2003; Baumeister and Tierney, 2011). It has been acknowledged as a vital element of wisdom (Birren and Fisher, 1990). Conation is distinguished from motivation in that willpower is linked to activities aimed at achieving a set objective, while motivation merely moves the individual to a state of eagerness, which in an extreme instance may also become quite static. As Poulsen (1991) says, motivation is a feeling whereas conation is the style of action that a person uses to respond to that feeling. Conation, therefore, is linked not only to the willpower necessary for fulfilling the set objectives, but also to the perseverance required for achieving the ultimate goal (Corno, 1993). Related to wisdom that means to persist in the attainment of proper understanding of the human nature.

The three levels of the individual's conative development are:

1. At the *formal stage*, the individual is unable to persist towards the goal, since their

attention may be deflected even by minor problems in execution, or by new challenges from the local environment. Furthermore, the individual is able to commit only to those objectives that are close spatially or temporally. At this level of development, the individual is only partially able to overcome the uncertainty regarding the results of his/her activities and to defer the immediate reward in order to attain a more important future goal. In the case that given goal is not achieved the situation is perceived as a failure.

2. At the systematic stage, the individual is capable to persist towards the given objective, despite new occurrences, which may arise in the environment while carrying out the activities for reaching the goal. At this level of development, the individual may also undertake aims, which are spatially and temporally remote. The rewards can be postponed in order to attain more long-term and important goals, although uncertainty represents a considerable obstacle to persevering along the path to the goal. Failure to achieve given goal is perceived as a learning opportunity.
3. At the metasystematic stage, the individual maintains complete devotion to the established goal, regardless of new opportunities or problems that might deflect their attention. The individual can aim for goals distant in space and time, and is able alone to shape them into an attractive and inspiring image. At this level of development, the individual accepts uncertainty as a fact that cannot be disregarded, but which can at times be mitigated by adopting various behavioral approaches. In no case, however, will s/he abandon attaining the goal on account of the feeling uncertain. Immediate rewards can be postponed, just as certain activities may be deferred or halted, if the individual recognizes that s/he is deviating from the set goal.

### ***The Individual's Moral Development***

An individual's moral development can be described using Kohlberg's (1969; 1981) three-level model of moral reasoning or ethical criteria (e.g. egoism, benevolence, and principle). These three criteria correspond to philosophy's three major classes of ethical theory: egoism, utilitarianism, and deontology. Cullen et al. (1989) define egoism as being motivated by the wish to maximize one's own interest; utilitarianism by the wish to maximize the interest of oneself and significant others; and deontology by the desire to do what is right, independently of the action's specific outcome. Based on work of Piaget (1969) and Feffer (1970), moral development can be understood as in direct relationship with an individual's ability to maintain a decentered perspective on their interaction with other people. This means understanding the situation from the other person's viewpoint, not just from one's own, and to behave in a proper way based on it.



The proposed individual's moral development model is based on three levels as above:

1. at the formal stage, the individual's actions are motivated by their own interests and comply with rules (i.e.; authority) to avoid unpleasant consequences. While it could happen that an individual's decisions serve the interests of others, there is no requirement that they do so. Whatever benefits the individual is appropriate to do if it does go against prevailing social roles, other people count only to a limited amount.
2. at the systematic stage, an individual understands the structure and functioning of the social order as a whole and their own duties and rights. The focus is on maintaining law and order by following the rules, doing one's duty and respecting authority. This includes accepting responsibilities for other people.
3. at the metastematic stage, individuals do not view themselves as separate from other people, societies, or nature. They are aware of, and recognize, the interconnectedness that exists between them and other natural and/or social complex systems. Actions are justified on the basis of universal abstract principles. Recognizing that sometimes peer and legal standards are not sufficient to be fully moral, the individual can participate in a dialogue about social values and responsibility to achieve social consensus and tolerance on conflicting issues. The individual is willing to pursue principles of justice and the rights of human beings, even if this is not expected from their peers or other people around him/her.

### ***The Individual's Emotional Development***

The emotions reflect the value relation of the individual towards objects in the external world, or towards his or her own self. Any object whatever (e.g. an event, person or situation) is essentially neutral until the individual confers upon it a personal negative or positive value, based on his/her emotional appraisal.

The model of the individual's emotional development, which is based on the emotional intelligence model of Mayer and Salovey (1997), comprises four types of skills, ranging from the basic psychological processes to the more complex processes of emotional and cognitive integration. The first type of skill represents a group of abilities that enable the individual to recognize, judge, and express feelings. These skills include recognizing one's own feelings and those of others, expressing one's own feelings and distinguishing among the emotions expressed by others. The other type of skill includes the use of feelings to alleviate and to order the priority of various ways of thinking. The third group includes skills such as characterizing and distinguishing between emotions, understanding the interlinking between various feelings, and devising the rules relating to them. The fourth type of skills

represents the individual's overall ability to control and direct emotions within the context of their objectives, self-knowledge and social awareness.

Three levels of the individual's emotional development are:

1. the formal stage at which the individual is capable of successfully recognizing and understanding their own emotion, while still not being able to fully regulate and express them in a way that others can easily understand without emotional overburden.
2. the systematic stage where the individual is capable of comprehending the emotional side of the situation. The individual is capable of regulating own emotions (i.e., stimulating the positive and calming down the negative feelings) and expressing them in a proper way. The individual is able reflexively to include or exclude personal emotions from judgment of the given situation, and thus to limit emotional partiality. Nonetheless, the individual has limited ability to regulate and direct the emotions of other people as well as to recognize transition between diverse emotions.
3. the metasystematic stage at which the individual is capable of mastering and directing is emotions and the emotions of others in a way that encourages attaining joint goals. At this level of development, the individual is capable of reflectively regulating own emotions without thereby suppressing or magnifying the feelings (i.e., information) that the emotions bring. The individual is aware of the fact that different emotional states stimulate different ways of settling matters, knows what emotions are needed for settling matters as they are encountered, and also how these emotions can be developed. S/he is fully capable of recognizing, understanding and becoming familiar with the emotions of others.

#### **4. Wisdom Development and Mindfulness**

According to developmental perspective we can recognize different families of hypotheses. Walsh (2012) defined four major families: specific stage hypotheses, interaction hypotheses, emergent hypothesis, and wisdom as a distinct developmental line. Above we considered that wisdom is a function of the maturation of multiple developmental lines. A similar emergence principle can be also found in contemplative disciplines. They “suggest that when multiple capacities and virtues are cultivated sufficiently, then a variety of insights into the mind and life can emerge and yield intuitive, conceptual, or transconceptual wisdom” (Walsh, 2012, p. 10). Contemplative disciplines offer us an opportunity to retain usual abilities while including heightened introspective and perceptual capacities. Different philosophical and religious contemplative practice suggest that certain kind of insight, understanding, and wisdom are more likely to occur in specific states of mind, and some

may occur *only* in specific states (Walsh, 2012, p. 11). Some higher states of consciousness may be doorways through which wisdom can merge and find expression. Walsh (2012) says that contemplation extend brief glimpses into continuous vision, novel perspectives into permanent meta-perspectives, and new insights into enduring understanding. As previously stated only advanced levels of human development enable a fully understanding and appreciation of the subtlest expression of wisdom (i.e., stage-specificity). In a similar way the insights of higher states of consciousness may not be fully comprehensible to those of us without direct experience of them (i.e., state-specificity).

Based on that we can conclude that wisdom is stage and state dependent, which probably represents another important barrier for people to fully recognize, understand, and appreciate wisdom. From wisdom development point of view higher levels of consciousness correlate with higher levels of development and vice versa. However, to achieve the highest level of wisdom (i.e.; transconceptual or transrational wisdom) we need to develop such a high level of awareness and insight into the true nature of things and self, which is possible only through contemplative practice. In other words transconceptual wisdom, which is different from any other type of wisdom in its nature and results, goes beyond any known stage of development as represents a pure consciousness. Wisdom can now catalyse an 'awakening' of the mind (Walsh, 2012).

## 5. Conclusion

Existing models of leadership emphasizes leadership of others at the expense of leadership of self and leadership of organization (Crossan et al., 2008). Wise leadership can offer a more holistic understanding of leadership needed to deal with the unique challenges posed in front the humankind. At the organizational level wise leadership emphasizes a common good approach. Common good as a proper balance among intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal interests in short and long term represents a challenge that cannot be solved without wisdom. In fact we need a post-formal or relativistic-dialectical thinking that integrates knowledge and character, mind and virtue (Kunzmann & Stange, 2006). Post-formal thinking enables one to detach itself from external influence and from regulations imposed by others and in that way to see the big picture and offering a coherent solution that enables the alignment of the strategy, organization, and environment.

Wisdom helps leaders to understand who the stakeholders are, what their needs are, what the environmental contingencies are, and what the actual state of the organization is. At the level of others wise leadership is capable to inspire, motivate and stimulate followers to move beyond their self-interest to self-actualization. At the personal level characteristics of wise leadership correspond to some positively oriented leadership models where self-awareness and self-regulation are their focal components (e.g.; authentic leadership, servant

leadership, servant leadership, and spiritual leadership). Among them can be mentioned Advanced Change Theory (Quinn, Spreitzer, & Brown, 2000), which requires changing the self and developing a high level of cognitive, behavioural, and moral complexity as to be able to change others and the system. In contrast to those models that emphasize the behavior of leaders or the context in which they act, the wise leadership focuses on what is behind leadership behaviour. Wisdom represents the core of their personality that allows them not to fall into one or more of six flaws as defined by Sternberg (2002): unrealistic-optimism fallacy, egocentrism fallacy, omniscience fallacy, omnipotence fallacy, invulnerability fallacy, and ethical disengagement fallacy.

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