



A WORD TO THE WISE

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INTRODUCTION

'Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding.' (Proverbs 4:7, The Bible)

For some time now, organisational theorists and practitioners have pointed out that the only constant these days is change. We can no longer rely on experience from the past to guide our decisions about the future. With ongoing globalisation, political instability and economic uncertainty, leaders can find themselves wringing their hands when faced with challenges, unpredictability and change. In light of this, there is fresh interest in the wisdom debate. Are there discernible, timeless veins of truth we can draw upon to guide our thinking and practice that transcend fluid, transient circumstances?

This is the standpoint from which this short paper starts. It explores wisdom, how do discern and develop it, along with some of the philosophical and practical changes this could entail. In particular, it draws on Christian insights, perspectives and experience to see what light they may shed on the debate, recognising that different Christian constituencies may view these issues differently and that people and communities holding different faiths and metaphysical beliefs could add their own distinctive contributions too.

WHAT IS WISDOM?

Who or what comes to mind when you hear the word wisdom? For me, it's iconic figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King or Mother Teresa of Calcutta. It's people who seem to have an ability to see what others don't see, to perceive greater depths or future horizons. It's people whose wisdom has been born out of experience, often tough life experience. It's people who have an ability to articulate their insight skilfully in a way that challenges and inspires profound change.

Another central figure stands out for me as a Christian working with Christian organisations, Jesus Christ. The Bible describes Jesus as the 'wisdom of God' (1 Corinthians 1:24, The Bible), God's wisdom personified. In this paradigm wisdom, like love, emerges through relationship with God, reflected in relationships with others. Wisdom is therefore first and foremost a relational quality, not simply an abstract rational-conceptual one. It outworks itself in sound judgement and ethical lifestyle.

In philosophy, wisdom is sometimes characterised as insight, conceptual awareness or knowledge. It may also be described as awareness of our not-knowing, or as knowing the limits of knowing. Wisdom tends to be less about facts and information and more about a way of seeing, perceiving, sense-making and understanding. It's about discerning patterns, themes and significance, sifting the proverbial wheat from the chaff. It's about making sound decisions in the face of difficult choices.

A tricky issue is how to know what is wise. How is wisdom different to, say, rational ability or intuitive insight? Is what appears wise socially constructed, a product of perspective and cultural experience? Who decides what is wise and what isn't and by what criteria? What if there are disagreements about a wise course of action?

Decisions taken by one generation which appeared wise at the time are often reviewed critically by later generations or by people in different cultures or parts of the world who hold different frames of reference. What appears wise when viewed close up can seem less wise when viewed from a different or wider perspective. Sometimes the wider perspective only becomes apparent with the benefit of hindsight.

WISDOM AS PERSPECTIVE

I'm immediately reminded of an old Chinese Taoist parable cited by Alison Hardingham in *Psychology for Trainers* (1998:116):

"The story describes a farmer in a poor country village. He was considered very well-to-do because he owned a horse that he used for ploughing, for riding around and for carrying things. One day, his horse ran away. All his neighbours exclaimed how terrible this was, but the farmer simply said, 'maybe'. A few days later the horse returned and brought two wild horses with it. The neighbours all rejoiced at his good fortune but the farmer said, 'maybe'.

The next day the farmer's son tried to ride one of the wild horses. The horse threw him and broke the boy's leg. The neighbours all offered their sympathy for this misfortune, but the farmer again said, 'maybe'. The next week conscription officers came to the village to take young men for the army. They rejected the farmer's son because of his broken leg. When the neighbours told him how lucky he was. The farmer simply replied, 'maybe'."

The book goes on to explain, using this story as an example of reframing. "The meaning that any event has depends upon the frame in which we perceive it. When we change the frame, we change the meaning. Having two wild horses is a good thing until it is seen in the context of the son's broken leg. The broken leg seems to be bad in the context of peaceful village life; but in the context of conscription and war it becomes good."

DISCERNING WISDOM

In light of this difficulty, Christian organisations seek God's wisdom as the widest frame of reference possible. The question of how to discern God's insight, God's voice, can be challenging and controversial, even within such organisations. Ironically, Christian organisations in the West are often known more for activism than reflection, driven more by mission, vision and goals than subtle qualities like pausing, presence and discernment. In light of this, they will sometimes actively diarise prayer and reflection (e.g. weekly meetings, leadership retreats) to make sure it happens.

In this sense, wisdom may be something about humility, awareness, being aware of our own constructs, biases, preferences, blind spots etc. and being open and courageous enough to consider alternatives seriously. This reframes an interview from a 'test' to a 'shared inquiry', an opportunity to see what emerges through genuine interaction around issues that really matter to people, to different stakeholders and the organisation. It presents an opportunity for fresh insight and innovation.

"It feels like a paradox. We need to hold onto our personal and professional beliefs and convictions firmly whilst, at the same time, be open to radical insights and paradigm shifts."

In my experience, people who are often most successful in organisations are those who have learned to 'read the signs' or 'read the times'. They may demonstrate this ability in how they relate to the panel, how they approach the question or scenario, how they navigate the recruitment process as a whole. It's something about authenticity, sensitivity and quality of contact that seem to make a difference. Such people exert influence naturally and skilfully by their insights, manner and presence.

WISDOM AND LEARNING

One of the challenges I've found in the wisdom debate as a whole is that, in contrast to related areas such as learning or knowledge management, so little appears to have been researched or written about it in leadership, management and organisation development research.

The nearest we tend to come to conscious and deliberate wisdom development in organisational thinking and practice is triple-loop learning, sense-making and knowledge management at individual, team and organisational levels. In the Christian organisations I've worked with, prayer, external coaching, action learning and learning reviews are common practice, all aimed at stepping back from immediate activity to discern deeper or wider issues or patterns and to develop insight, confidence and ability for the future.

"We have a diverse programme of prayer and reflection opportunities where staff from different backgrounds and traditions can come together to discuss current issues or simply sit quietly and seek God's guidance. This is integral to our business practice."

It's one thing to pray for wisdom, however, and quite another thing to recognise it. For instance, how do you know wisdom when you see it? Is it something that can be quantified, measured, built into a competency framework? Is it something you can recruit for or develop? Is it a some-thing at all?

Think about it. Imagine recruiting for a new post in your organisation. If wisdom is something you prize as an organisation, what do you mean by it? How would you articulate it in a job advert, job description, person specification? If you asked a candidate, 'how wise are you?', what could they answer? What could a person do to provide evidence of their wisdom? Is wisdom, like humility, something that's often invisible to the person him or herself but evident to others?

At interviews, it's common practice to pose scenarios and to test how a candidate may approach them. The panel is looking for evidence of the candidate exercising wise judgement, especially in leadership or professional roles that involve decision making in the midst of high degrees of complexity, ambiguity, uncertainty and change.

"We draw up questions and pose scenarios that test candidates' ability to demonstrate capability in the areas we have identified as important for the role and culture."

The panel has usually already made its own decision about what constitutes a wise response, often framed as what it considers to be 'good practice'. The risk is therefore that prevailing perspectives and practices are perpetuated and reinforced rather than examined and challenged. An important question may be, therefore, how to enable a panel to prepare itself beforehand to be exposed to fresh perspectives and approaches whilst suspending prior assumptions or judgements.

The underlying intention of such interventions and processes is usually to accelerate normal processes of learning, to focus on drawing out learning and meaning from day-to-day experiences and to reapply that learning in new situations.

It's action research in action, developing strategic hypotheses based on research, experience and intuition, testing those hypotheses in practice, reflecting critically on what happened, drawing conclusions, sharing the results with others, developing a new hypothesis and continuing the process of learning.

"We recognise the need to learn from experience in order to repeat successes and avoid repeating mistakes. In order to avoid recycling the same old assumptions and conclusions, we draw in external people from other sectors or fields to offer challenge and critique."

It's a good model but has its challenges, e.g. how to create and safeguard space for intentional reflective activities in a passionate, ambitious organisation. International NGOs of the type I've worked with exist to improve people's lives in the world's toughest places.

The scale and depth of need in such environments is so great and the issues so complex that it would be easy to get drawn into ever-increasing busyness and burnout. Such organisations need considerable wisdom and self-discipline to remain focused, optimistic, realistic and effective.

DEVELOPING WISDOM

Such approaches assume that wisdom can be learned, that it is possible, in effect, to develop a person, team or organisation's wisdom quotient. If so, what would be the best ways to do it? What are the conditions that make the positive difference? Is it possible to develop wisdom vicariously through others' experience, or only through one's own?

Christian organisations may hold the view that absolute wisdom can only be known by revelation from God and that, even then, we need to be careful how we interpret it. After all, according to this belief, God reveals himself objectively but humans receive him subjectively. This creates a paradox: humans need to pray for wisdom to discern God's revelation of wisdom correctly. It's a wisdom that becomes apparent through encounter and transformation by God, not by reasoning alone.

"When we pray to seek God's wisdom, we are acknowledging our own limited capacity to see the bigger picture and wider, long-term implications of our decisions and actions."

But how does this play out in day to day decision-making? What about in organisations that don't share this theological viewpoint? The approach I use and recommend is to develop on-going reflective practice through mechanisms including coaching and action learning. This involves regularly stepping back from day-to-day activity to reflect on experiences, comparing and contrasting with relevant theory and research where available, drawing out key learning points.

I've found this principle to be particularly powerful in meetings. Leaders often have packed and time-pressured agendas. It can feel counter-intuitive but nevertheless prove beneficial to pause before diving straight into business to ask, 'What feels most important here and now?', 'What would enable you to contribute your best in this meeting?', 'What do we need to be effective?', 'What's your intuition telling you?', 'What themes are emerging?' etc.

This approach is less concerned with resolving immediate issues and more with developing a grounding of insight, professional judgement and practice that enables a person, team or organisation to work effectively together and make sound decisions. It's about progressively creating a deep pool of wisdom from which to draw when facing decisions, then adding to and enriching the pool as a person or team gains and feeds in critical reflections from further experience.

"The simple formula we use is 'pause-reflect-act'. It's an approach that requires commitment and discipline and a belief that the long-term benefits will outweigh the short-term costs."

CONSTRUCTED WISDOM

The social construction issue raised earlier has interesting wider implications. For instance, is wisdom something held by a special individual, or could the individual's wisdom be a manifestation of a wider group experience or phenomenon? Has an individual gained what others perceive as wisdom through interacting with a wider family, community or organisation over time so that what he or she represents is an accumulation or distillation of a wider group's tacit wisdom?

"We believe that although wisdom sometimes emerges through an individual's insight or action, it may equally emerge through the considered reflection or action of a group. This is consistent with our belief about the mysterious collective nature of the 'body of Christ.'" (1 Corinthians 12:10, The Bible)

If the latter is the case, wisdom development could be envisaged as a process of creating the right conditions for a group (e.g. exposure to challenging, stimulating experiences) for wisdom to emerge between participants, even if particular individuals will be likely to feel and articulate that wisdom more clearly or vividly than others owing to their personal qualities, experience, capabilities etc. In this sense, wisdom could be conceived as an interpersonal phenomenon rather than simply as an individual attribute.

I've noticed how often wisdom emerges into conscious foreground from hidden background in groups when we deliberately pause, for example in meetings, to ask what feel like paradoxical questions. 'What are we not noticing?', 'What are we not talking about?', 'What are we not paying attention to?', 'What decisions are we not taking?' It's as if our rational preoccupations and activity can block or distract us from discerning hidden moods, patterns and themes that could prove profound and vitalising.

This leads us to consider what it could mean to be a wise organisation, akin to a learning organisation. What would the difference be between an organisation with wise individuals in it and a wise organisation? I would expect to see wisdom developed and shared between people and applied to organisational strategy, policy and practice, with organic processes for review and evaluation. In this sense, wisdom could be regarded as an evolving, institutionalised, cultural phenomenon.

WISDOM AND SPIRITUALITY

I mentioned earlier how Christian organisations I work with regard discerning God's wisdom as a critical issue. This ethos and practice reveals underlying organisational beliefs and assumptions about dependence on God for wisdom that transcends normal human abilities to discern. Dependence requires humility and patience, a willingness to be challenged.

Spiritual discernment by definition demands faith. 'What is God saying?', 'What do we understand by what he may be saying to us?', 'What sense do we make of it?', 'How can we distinguish God's voice from others, including our own?'

A challenge arises when people hold different beliefs about what God is saying to the organisation. This isn't a decision that can be taken lightly or hierarchically. There is always a risk that people will project their own issues or agendas onto the organisation or onto God, or that different people will discern different things that, on the face of it, sound contradictory. The leadership challenge is to listen, hear, weigh up prayerfully and take a decision, in faith.

"We can't always reconcile different views of what God may be 'saying' to us. We have to weigh it up against biblical teaching and our own judgement as leaders. Having said that, it's surprising how often we do reach agreement when we pause to reflect and pray, to really hear each other, instead of debating until one side wins and another side loses."

Different Christian organisations would approach these issues and questions differently. The underlying belief is that God desires to give wisdom to human beings if we are open to seek and receive him. In this sense, the wisdom quest feels less like a rational puzzle to be solved and more like a phenomenological journey of discovery and awakening.

CONCLUSION

We have considered the wisdom debate from different perspectives and noted that defining wisdom can be problematic philosophically and practically, partly because what may be regarded as 'wise' may also be regarded as socially constructed. Christian organisations may seek wisdom as a form of objective revelation but nevertheless face challenges when attempting to discern and interpret what they experience as revelation.

In spite of these challenges, we have noted that leaders in organisations can nevertheless engage in practices, individually or in teams, that help raise awareness, surface underlying assumptions, enable assumptions to be tested and create opportunities for fresh learning. These practices enable flexible proactivity and responsiveness to the future.

Such approaches, which in Christian organisations include prayer, demand a desire to learn and a willingness to have existing paradigms challenged to accommodate new realities. In this sense, wisdom may be as much about attitude as insight or action. The Bible describes a healthy 'fear of God' as the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10), an attitude of heart and mind that demands humility, places everything in perspective and roots wisdom in the context of relationship and ethics. That may be an important point on which to finish this article. I will be interested to hear what readers think.

REFERENCES

Hardingham, Alison (1998). *Psychology for Trainers*, Wiltshire: Cromwell Press.

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