



The Wise Leader

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We humans love a strong leader and we've seen plenty of them recently. The strong men of popular politics, in societies all around the world. They share characteristics with some of the corporate titans who turn up in the highest levels of organisations. Look at the front pages of business magazines and Sunday supplements and you see a pattern not far from the all-conquering kings of old. Risk takers, people movers, peddlers of compelling visions. They gather their teams and focus them on an enemy. Apparently fearless, they're ready to step into the danger, to battle and seize the day.

But other evidence can be brought to bear.

Grandiose, entitled, overly self-confident, risk-seeking, manipulative, and hostile leaders, say O'Reilly and Chatman, have profiles matching what the American Psychiatric Association classifies as narcissistic personality disorder. People with these characteristics are often those to whom we hand the highest power, the biggest jobs, the right to shape the world in which we live and work. We may speak of them as transformational players – the makers and shapers of our world.

In several notorious cases, dysfunctional organisational leaders such as this have led to the destruction of value amounting to many billions of dollars.

More often perhaps, and certainly less visibly, the consequences are less dramatic but no less serious. Employees and the organisation as whole suffer a loss of curiosity and creative possibility as contrary views become silenced. There is a disappearance of nuance and difference as people try to follow the leader. Thinking and acting within the guardrails of the dominant style becomes the unconsciously enforced norm.

Noisy egos, at all levels in organisations, bring chaos or stifled compliance in their wake.

As educators and consultants working in the process of leadership development, we have come increasingly to recognise some of the problems inherent in the concept of leadership itself. High on the list is the notion that a leader is always somehow special. In response to this and to some of the issues we outline below, we have developed the concept of Wise Leadership – what it is and how it can be brought about.

One of the key characteristics of Wise Leaders, as we understand it, is that they have quieter egos.

Barring a very few exceptional saints and sages, all of us have an ego – that inner voice which nature has endowed us with and which, for thousands of years, played a key part in our rise to dominance as a species. That voice, abstracted from present moment experience, helps us plan for the future, reflect on the past and stay safe. It enables us to navigate our surroundings, understand ourselves in relation to others and create effective social groups.

It can also get in our way.

“Will I be OK?”

“Will they like me?”

“What did I do that she looks at me like that?”

“Have I got all the slides prepared for that presentation next week? Is it going to go well? Have I done everything I need to do? Have I?”

“One day they're going to find out I'm not good enough...”

“This is a good experience. I'm having a good experience right now. I'm fine. This is great, this is great...”

On and on and on.

Spend a few minutes alone with yourself in silence, turn your attention inwards and listen. The chatty voice of one's ego is rarely still.

Much of the time that's not a problem. But because our egos are generally disposed to seek out and prioritise our own interests first, there are times when, especially as leaders, it is important to come away from all that chatty-ego noise and focus on the needs and opinions of others. Failure to do this leads to the kind of self-serving attitudes to leadership we see reflected, for example, in the soaring levels of senior executive remuneration and increasingly problematic income disparity.

To lead well, those of us who lead must learn to quieten our egos.

The quiet ego is not a fragile, squashed or unwillingly silenced ego. It is deeply resilient, attuned to its own and others' inner dynamics. It has no inherent need to assert itself over others. Loud egos, on the other hand, draw sustenance primarily from the world of external appearances to which they constantly turn for reassurance.

Wise Leaders have quieter egos. They have learned to build on their own strengths and they recognise, and engage in development around, areas where they are weaker. They have compassion for others and for themselves.

Not taken in by social image, Wise Leaders recognize the self as a construction – a story that enables a sense of unity and purpose but throws the shadows of illusions that may sometimes be destructive. Noisier egos expend considerable energy in identifying and defending their constructed selves as if they were somehow real – asserting themselves into the world.

Wise Leaders are more self-aware than that – and less defensive. Seeing the interdependent nature of self and others, they are compassionate, resilient and self-assured.

Once the Covid-19 pandemic recedes, leaders will be called on to build a new world fit for the new circumstances. They will be called on to build back better. In this new space of leadership, simply repeating previous patterns won't work. This is a time of unprecedented challenge and opportunity and leaders will need to get their own egos out of the way so that they can enable and draw on the wisdom of a highly connected and collaborative community all around them.

With our old maps now to some extent broken, we can't use them to navigate in the new world beset by mass unemployment, unsustainable income inequality, climate change and extreme weather events, species extinction, novel viruses and other pandemics, AI and other technologies that disrupt and re-form the ways we live, work and consume.

Without maps and therefore unable to navigate, leaders must learn instead to explore this new terrain. To do that successfully, they must learn to still their own egos. They must find ways of coming away from the grandiosity and the anxiety that keeps their over-pumped egos in place, telling and re-telling inner-stories whose primary purpose is to keep them safe.

Drawing on the work of Wayment & Bauer, we suggest there are four factors which help the ego to quieten and for wisdom to begin to emerge. We think of these four factors as crucial elements in leadership development. They are: mindfulness; a sense of interdependence; compassion; and a framework of values that spring from these and which support continuous personal growth.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a quality of present moment attention that is marked by three intertwined characteristics: Allowing, Inquiry and Meta-awareness (AIM).

Allowing is the reality-oriented willingness to let what is the case be the case. It is the non-judgemental acceptance of things as they are. As such, it is the necessary basis on which to freely choose to act or not on what one perceives.

Inquiry stands for a vital, open-hearted engagement with present moment experience.

Meta-awareness is the capacity at times simply to observe what you are thinking, feeling, and sensing. Like stepping out of a fast-flowing stream onto the riverbank, you see the rush of experience for what it actually is in the moment: a torrent of thoughts, feelings, sensations and impulses. As a result, you don't mistake your thoughts about things for things as actually they are.

These three capacities spark a curiosity and willingness to accept what one finds about oneself or others and to hold that lightly. That reduces defensiveness and enables deeper understandings. Increased resilience, better decision-making, richer and more generative conversations follow.

A sense of interdependence

A novel virus somehow infects a person in Wuhan in China and very soon the world's economies crash and over a million people lose their lives.

We live, and always have done, in an interdependent world.

Each of us interdepends not only on others but with the whole of nature. Wise Leaders intuit that interconnectedness. They know themselves to be embedded in a vital flow of life all around.

Valuing their connection with others, Wise Leaders seek to understand other people's perspectives. They see past differences to the more unifying aspects of our common humanity. And they naturally act in ways that are ecologically, socially and ethically responsible.

Compassion

Compassion is the accepting, empathic desire to bring about the well-being of a person or group. It is the affective impulse that gives rise to compassionate action.

Compassion can be directed to oneself as much as to others and wise leaders strive to balance their own and other's needs.

Compassion and interdependence are clearly co-related.

Recognising the complex web that sustains us all, wise leaders seek to maximise the wellbeing of their people, their teams, organisations, customers and other stakeholders. They don't turn away from the inevitable complexity and all the apparent contradictions that such impulses give rise to.

A framework of values

In a process of personal development, as wisdom emerges so self-preoccupation diminishes. Wise Leaders derive their sense of meaning and satisfaction from their own and others' growth and development; from their sense of social responsibility and from virtue. They get pleasure from their connection with other people and with humanity at large.

Underlying all of this will be a framework of values that enable Wise Leaders to ground themselves in what they most deeply care about.

In the new world, Wise Leaders will build willing, co-operative communities, teams and organisations. They will help to enable higher levels of psychological safety, creativity and well-being amongst those they influence. That will increase team and organisational performance.

Wise Leadership can be taught.

Both mindfulness and compassion can readily be increased by training. A sense of interdependence can emerge from conceptual conviction. An impulse to grow further can be sparked and sustained by mentors and coaches who can help to illuminate leaders' values.

This is great news, because recent evidence shows we need better explorers of what is possible; people who are able to see the connection between things and who can work with others to create joined-up responses. We need leaders who are better able to understand that different people and groups have sometimes radically different experiences of the world, and who are open to this as data – using the potential of all to create stronger organisations and fairer societies.

Our world is strongly marked by diminishing trust in our leaders. We need Wise Leadership as never before.

There is a lot of work to do. It is time to begin.