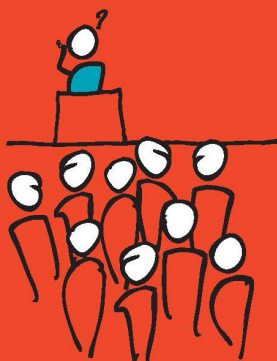


WILEY
e-sampler

MARK STROM

LEAD WITH WISDOM

HOW
WISDOM
TRANSFORMS
POOR
LEADERS
INTO
GREAT
LEADERS



WILEY

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INTRODUCTION

Mud. That's what Aussie bricklayers call mortar. Leadership is a lot like laying bricks. Every day you handle 'bricks'. These are the substantial things that have to be done, delivered, checked, and signed off. But in and around them is the 'mortar' of countless small things. Like the words you use. Or the corridor chats. Or what you did with that nagging intuition. Or if you were really present in that conversation yesterday. Or whether you believe your own strategy. The strength of a wall is in the mortar, not the bricks. This is a book about laying bricks. The 'mud' is wisdom.

Leadership needs wisdom. Every day you face oddities that need more than standard answers. Sometimes you just need a great question to unearth what's really going on. But how do you find a great question? How do you craft a compelling argument for moving forward? How do you do this so people come with you as active authors rather than as passive readers? How do you help them find their brilliance? For that matter, how do you find your own brilliance and become more deliberate about leading from it? This is the stuff of wisdom.

None of this is about numbers and formulas, or even processes. It's not even so much about answers. It's deeper and simpler and more human. This is about how words shape our experience. About how people interpret and form meaning. About the power of questions and stories. More than anything, it's about relationships. How you build true authority and influence. What it takes for people to trust you. How you stay true in the face of fear or opportunity. What it means to be present and attentive to people and ideas. And how you bring conversations alive that stimulate serious innovation and deep, lasting change.

None of this comes quickly or easily. I've been a CEO twice as well as advising many leaders over many years. I know that the expectations of leadership can be overwhelming. A lot pushes back at you from outside and inside. The good news is that we don't need to master any of this. What we need is the desire and confidence to grow.

Wisdom is for dining rooms, lunch rooms, board rooms, and parliaments. *Lead with Wisdom* offers a map of wisdom for leaders and clues for navigating from it. You can see that map on page 2 and repeated at the start of each section. There are four parts to the map and the book, and thirteen chapters.

In Part I: Wisdom and Leadership, I view wisdom as reading the patterns of life with discernment and applying your insights with integrity and care. I then look at leadership as a pattern of human experience. My aim is to dignify leadership while demystifying it.

In Part II: Patterns, I examine four patterns of human experience that you deal with every day. I call them Naming, Conversation, Influence, and Character. Simply, they are about how language shapes reality, how meaning is formed in dialogue, how relationship shapes influence, and how the will faces uncertainty and fear.

In Part III: Arts, I examine four arts for working with the patterns. I call them Story, Brilliance, Promise, and Grace. Simply, we learn to work with story to shape identity, intent and community; we learn to draw out people's capacity to shine; we learn to speak so as to deepen character and hope; and we learn how to strengthen heart through dignity and kindness.

In Part IV: Applying the Patterns and Arts, I share three stories central to how I came to see these patterns and arts and work with them. The first is my own story. I tell it to encourage you to know and tell your own. The second is the story of my friendship with my son Luke through rich and difficult years. The third is an ancient story whose legacy is the contradictions that shape our ongoing attempts to lead with wisdom.

A simple idea underpins the design of the book. Apart from the final three stories and chapters, there is a single idea to each page or double page spread. Think of them as conversation starters that build one upon the other. There are also specific layouts throughout to distinguish different types of content that build and crystallise the whole meaning.

There are one and two page 'articles' where I address important tangents. For example, this isn't a book on strategy but when you link wisdom and leadership to strategy you get some interesting ideas. The illustrations help illuminate the ideas, make key concepts accessible, and hopefully take some stuffiness out of leadership. The 'Question and Answer' sections in each chapter are a personal favourite where I've tried to anticipate what a reader might want to ask at those points. And every chapter mixes ideas from history and even a little philosophy with everyday stories and practical how-to suggestions. It's full of tips.

Wisdom is big and old, but it should also stay accessible and fresh. This is a book you can dip in and out of, go deeper on certain topics, pause, skip forward, and easily come back later. You can read from start to back, a chapter at a time, or just browse. May it refresh your heart and mind to lead with wisdom.

PART I

Wisdom and Leadership

Leadership needs wisdom. Although we can gain wisdom and still not lead well, no-one leads well without wisdom.

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WHY?

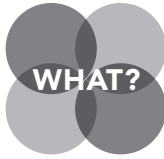
WISDOM AND LEADERSHIP

- 1 Wisdom
- 2 Leadership

Why do we need to lead with wisdom?

PATTERNS

- 3 Naming
- 4 Conversation
- 5 Influence
- 6 Character



ARTS

- 7 Story
- 8 Brilliance
- 9 Promise
- 10 Grace

How do we lead with wisdom?

WHERE?

APPLYING THE PATTERNS AND ARTS

- 11 Leader's Journey
- 12 Leading One
- 13 Leading Many

Where must we lead with wisdom?

THE STORY BEHIND WISDOM AND LEADERSHIP

Leadership needs wisdom

I never particularly liked the word leadership. I always knew it could be a rich word full of nobility and people doing bold or selfless things to open up a way through great difficulties. But it could also mask something narcissistic or even darker.

Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Mandela, and Mary Robinson are all called leaders who served their people well. We hear stories of unsung people who lead people to safety and action in the face of floods, fires, famine, and war. We've also seen and heard manipulation, intimidation, belittling, and hype called 'being a leader'. Everyone who accepts the call to lead must find a way to think about leadership. For my part, I put it inside the bigger idea of wisdom.

In Chapter 1: Wisdom, I view wisdom in terms of reading the patterns of life. It's an old idea found in traditions from the ancient Near East to the First Peoples of America. The ways most things happen in the human and non-human worlds forms patterns. We grow wise by paying attention to them and drawing conclusions that help us live well. And living well brings integrity and care into the picture.

In Chapter 2: Leadership, I apply this old insight to leadership itself. What is leading if it too is a pattern? I think this helps sort out some old questions, like: born or made, position or person, formal or informal. Since we were kids just about everyone has led at some time. And, no matter who you are, or what your title or role, you still have to follow. It's the pattern. That means our positions don't make us leaders. Our positions are our contexts, where we can lead wisely or foolishly. But we want to lead wisely. So let's start with wisdom.

WISDOM READS LIFE'S
PATTERNS WITH
DISCERNMENT, INTEGRITY
AND CARE. SO MUCH
DEPENDS ON HOW
ATTENTIVE AND PRESENT
WE ARE TO LIFE.

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CHAPTER 1

Wisdom

Wisdom is the stuff of life

We know it when we see it

Plato recalled Socrates saying, 'the unexamined life is not worth living'. Whether the old sage was right, we cannot say. But what we surely can say is that the unreflective life seldom leads to wisdom.

No definition will do wisdom justice. It's simply too vast, subtle, and profound. Yet wisdom is not utterly mysterious to us: we recognise it in the words, actions and characters of people. Perhaps, like love, we know wisdom more tacitly than overtly: we know more than we can say or define. We know love, and wisdom, as much by its absence as its presence, and we can discern the genuine article from pretence. And, like love, we long for the ways wisdom enriches and completes us.

Wisdom is as old as humanity: the accumulated insights of cultures and traditions gained over vast generations. At our best, we live, we notice, we learn, we remember, and we bequeath a better legacy.

Wisdom is as varied as we are. It lives in all our glory and profundity, contradiction and absurdity. We glimpse it in fleeting insights as often as in settled understanding. We name an enduring relationship with our dearest ones as a life of love. Yet not every moment of even the most intimate relationship bears all the marks of love. We cannot live with such intensity. Likewise no-one, not even the wisest, thinks and acts with unbroken wisdom. Just as we lapse into forgetfulness and thoughtlessness toward the ones we love most, so even the wisest lapse into folly.

Wisdom is disarmingly human: always within reach, yet somehow elusive. So how do we recognise it?

Wisdom is close at hand

We recognise wisdom

We recognise wisdom in those we admire as honourable, perceptive or grounded. We bring to mind those we believe have made the world a better place. We recall those who have touched our own lives for good.

Imagine if we could invite them all to dinner, the famous along with our own dear friends. What a conversation that would be! One thing's for sure: they would disagree as often as they agreed. Few would have made the same decision in the same way in the same context. At some point, the simplest might stump the smartest. The obscure might confound the famous. The uneducated might instruct the learned. No-one has a mortgage on wisdom. Wisdom crosses culture and geography, education and accomplishment, personality and experience.

The most precious resource we have for coping with life in an unstable, discontinuous and revolutionary world is not information, but each other. Wisdom is not to be found in a database; it grows out of the experience of living the life of the human herd and absorbing the lessons which that experience inevitably teaches us about who we are.[1]

HUGH MCKAY

We have known the wise

In seminars and workshops over the years I have asked people to recall those whom they considered wise. People for whom we are grateful, whose words and lives have influenced ours for good. Many find it odd to speak of others as wise but, as we recall the stories, the word begins to feel apt.

It feels natural to compile a list of attributes. But no list will do justice to experience: stories are the key. The subtlety and depth of the friends we recall lies in their stories. It is here that the textures and hues of wisdom become apparent.

Some speak of friends who gave strong and emphatic direction and counsel. Other friends would not give advice. Instead they made room for us working things out ourselves, and for learning from our own mistakes. Wisdom came in gentle tones—or like a whack on the side of the head! I commend to you the same exercise: to consider those who have been wise in your own life.

We begin to sense that wisdom is contextual. An action in one place may be wise, but in another context it may be foolish. The wisdom sayings are commonly misunderstood as rules or moral guidelines. Sometimes this may be part of the original authors' intent, but generally they are better read as observations of life. Not 'life should be this', but 'this is what I have seen'.

THE PRIORITY OF WISDOM

The sages differed on many things. But they agreed on one big thing. Wisdom matters most to people and communities who seek to live well.

Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost you all you have, get understanding.[2]

SOLOMON

He who knows others is clever, he who knows himself has discernment.

He who masters others has force, he who masters himself is strong.

He who knows contentment is rich, he who perseveres is a man of purpose.[3]

LAO-TSE

At fifteen I set my heart on learning; at thirty I took my stand; at forty I had no doubts; at fifty I was conscious of the decrees of heaven; at sixty I was already obedient to these decrees; at seventy I just followed my heart's desire, without overstepping the boundaries (of what is right).[4]

CONFUCIUS

Imperturbable wisdom, being most honorable, is worth everything.[5]

DEMOCRITUS

A man, though wise, should never be ashamed of learning more, and must unbend his mind.[6]

SOPHOCLES

Everybody ought by all means to try and make himself as wise as he can.[7]

PLATO

Each one has just so much of happiness as he has of virtue and wisdom, and of virtuous and wise action.[8]

ARISTOTLE

There is no purtier in this world like wisdom.[9]

BHAGAVAD GITA

No man is ever wise enough by himself.[10]

PLAUTUS

If wisdom be attainable, let us not only win but enjoy it.[11]

CICERO

Wisdom is the conqueror of fortune.[12]

JUVENAL

For what is more agreeable than wisdom itself, when you think of the security and the happy course of all things which depend on the faculty of understanding and knowledge.[13]

MARCUS AURELIUS

Wisdom has an advantage: She is eternal.[14]

BALTHASAR GRACIAN

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?[15]

TS ELIOT

A useful distinction: Wisdom is observation and insight, not law, morality, or formula

Law, morality, and formula view life as binary — as involving choices between in/out, good/bad, best/worst. Wisdom views life as a whole — a vast complex tapestry.

For millennia people have looked to their wisdom traditions for guidance. These profound observations of life have instructed and warned generations. But the traditions cannot tell us what to do. The decisions remain ours and through them we grow wise ... or foolish.

The wisdom traditions reflect life as it was experienced, not as a moralist might claim it should be. Wisdom is therefore always contextual.

The sayings of the wisdom traditions are very often imbalanced, incomplete and liable to misunderstanding. They cannot offer prescriptions for life since, again, wisdom needs to be related to a specific context. So wisdom leaves us the task of discernment. We must say how, or even whether, their observations speak to our particular situation.

In the Hebrew Proverbs we find two curious contradictory pieces of advice:

Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.[16]

SOLOMON

These two sayings, arranged one after the other, advise opposite courses of

action when confronted by someone spouting nonsense. 'Do not answer a fool according to his folly'. How many would-be critics end up looking as foolish as the people they judge! Yet sometimes foolishness should be exposed. 'Answer the fool according to his folly'. There is a time to play the court jester, lampooning the king with his own foolishness.

So how do I know which strategy to choose? I have to make a wise response to my particular context. But how do I make this wise response? By becoming wise! Wait: I'm going in a circle! Yes, it is a circle and there's only one way ahead: it's back to reading patterns.

Wisdom views life as a whole — a vast complex tapestry. It urges us to watch, to listen, to read, to discern, and to store up insights we can draw from later.

We recognise wisdom. We know it even though we can't define it. We see wisdom, and foolishness, most easily in people. And we know that wisdom depends on context. This makes wisdom far richer and subtler than rules, morals systems, or processes.

Wisdom addresses a management paradox. We commonly say that complexity, connectivity, and the pace of change are increasing. We stress 'big picture' thinking but may defer to analysing the parts rather than reading the whole. This is the domain of wisdom.

Wisdom reads well the patterns of life

Reading life

No definition does justice to wisdom. Wisdom is as broad as the ability to live well grounded in good understanding. We grow in knowledge of ourselves and of the world around us, and we learn to make good choices and to live well with others.

Life seems an impossibly complex tapestry. We have the sense of ‘weaving’ — of colours and hues that suggest everything is somehow connected — but the scale of it overwhelms. We would be utterly lost in the vastness of life were it not for our ability to see similarities between situations despite their myriad differences.

Reading is the metaphor used by the ancients:

The mark of wisdom is to read aright the present, and to march with the occasion.[17]

HOMER

The wisdom traditions speak of reading life’s ‘patterns’. We see analogies, links and levels in every facet of life. We see patterns in the natural world. Humility is likened to a river: the river only becomes greater by always descending to a lower place. The industry of ants is a provocation to human diligence. We see patterns in each other — in our behaviours, personalities, and characters. And we see patterns in the events that fill our lives. These patterns are our pathways to understanding.

Reading and living patterns

So here is a working definition of wisdom:

Wisdom is reading and living the patterns of life well.

Let me expand that in two halves:

1. Wisdom is ways of being and knowing by which we indwell and read the patterns of life insightfully — the patterns of our own lives, of each other, and of the wider world.
2. Wisdom is then bringing this indwelling and insight to specific contexts with attentiveness and discernment, integrity and care.

Finding patterns

Patterns simplify complexity. We collect memories and hunches of things that went together. Bringing them to mind we say, ‘I’ve seen that before!’ But what’s a pattern?

There’s no end to patterns because patterns are not ‘out there’ like rocks on the ground. The patterns are similarities we notice. They are more in our heads than out there in the world, though they fit what’s out there. I think of them as ‘Ways life goes together that I have noticed’. Kind of like the ‘books of life’ I’ve read.



Watch life's patterns and learn

The patterns of nature teach us

In many traditions, nature is infused with wisdom and the wise read this:

There is no river that permits itself to be concealed; that is, it breaks the dam by which it was hidden. So also the soul goes to the place which it knows, and deviates not from its way of yesterday.[18]

THE INSTRUCTION OF KING MERI-KA-RE

Earth teach me quiet — as the grasses are still with new light.

Earth teach me suffering — as old stones suffer with memory.

Earth teach me humility — as blossoms are humble with beginning.

Earth teach me caring — as mothers nurture their young.

Earth teach me courage — as the tree that stands alone.

Earth teach me limitation — as the ant that crawls on the ground.

Earth teach me freedom — as the eagle that soars in the sky.

Earth teach me acceptance — as the leaves that die each fall.

Earth teach me renewal — as the seed that rises in the spring.

Earth teach me to forget myself — as melted snow forgets its life.

Earth teach me to remember kindness — as dry fields weep with rain.[19]

NATIVE AMERICAN UTE PRAYER

The patterns of people teach us

The traditions urge us to read people well to live well. Watch how people deal with one another. Imitate the ways of the wise. Shun the way of fools:

Do not set out to stand around in the assembly.

Do not loiter where there is a dispute, for in the dispute they will have you as an observer.

Then you will be made a witness for them, and they will involve you in a lawsuit to affirm something that does not concern you.

In case of a dispute, get away from it, disregard it.

A dispute is a covered pit, a ... wall which can cover over its foes; it brings to mind what one has forgotten and makes an accusation against a man.[20]

THE INSTRUCTIONS OF SHURUPPAK

Is a man not superior, who without anticipating attempts at deception or presuming acts of bad faith, is, nonetheless, the first to be aware of such behaviour?[21]

CONFUCIUS



Learning wisdom from the human and non-human world.

Words change things

Our lives are shaped by words. An apt word can bring life. An ill-considered word can bring ruin. The wisdom traditions placed great emphasis on a word in or out of season, on speech, and ‘the tongue’:

More than all watchfulness watch thy mouth, and over what thou hearest harden thy heart. For a word is a bird: once released, no man can recapture it.[22]

THE WORDS OF AHIQAR

Do not associate thyself to the heated man,
Nor visit him for conversation.
Preserve thy tongue from answering thy superior,
And guard thyself against reviling him.
Do not make too free with thy answer.[23]

THE INSTRUCTION OF AMEN-EM-OPET

My son, chatter not overmuch so that thou speak out every word that comes to thy mind; for men’s eyes and ears are everywhere trained upon thy mouth. Beware lest it be thy undoing.[24]

THE WORDS OF AHIQAR

Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment.[25]

SOLOMON

Many men perform the foulest deeds and practice the fairest words.[26]

Fine words do not hide foul actions nor is a good action spoiled by slanderous words.[27]

DEMOCRITUS

To fail to speak to a man who is capable of benefiting is to let a man go to waste. To speak to a man who is incapable of benefiting is to let one’s words go to waste. A wise man lets neither men nor words go to waste.[28]

CONFUCIUS

Words are the primary tool of every leader. So much depends on the words we use, the ways we speak, and the language and conversations we foster among others. Foolish words bring ruin. Words of value build people of value.

Ancient speech tips

- Let another praise you, not you.
- Don’t say every word you think of!
- To answer before listening: that is folly.
- Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent.
- When words are many, evil is present.
- Whoever spreads slander is a fool.
- A flattering mouth works ruin.
- A fool shows his annoyance at once.
- Arrogant lips are unsuited to a fool.
- Fine words do not hide foul actions.
- A fortune made by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapour and a deadly snare.[29]
- Don’t loiter where there is a dispute.
- Watch your mouth and heart.

THE BIG IDEA OF THE **ONE AND MANY**

Corporations, governments and not-for-profits have adopted a common vocabulary. Merger. Acquisition. Divestment. Centralisation. Decentralisation. Restructuring. Unification. Diversification. Sounds very modern. But they are actually our institutional versions of an ancient question.

Where philosophy began

Ever wondered how philosophy began? To oversimplify greatly a very long story, Western philosophy began with one big question: How come there is unity — coherence, order, meaning — within the bewildering diversity of life? (In different ways, this question shaped both Western and Eastern traditions of philosophy.) What we call unity and diversity, the ancients called 'the One and the Many'. The 'One' as in the whole; the 'Many' as in the parts.

Ideas arise in social contexts; so did the question of One and Many. Life in each city-state (*polis*) of what we now call Greece was largely self-contained. The seventh century BC began unprecedented access to other peoples and ideas.

This brought unsettling questions. In what ways were other peoples and conventions the same (One) and in what ways different (Many)? It seemed, for example, that every city had an idea of justice; but not always the same idea. Was justice merely a convention, or was there something

universal to the idea? So how should a city frame its laws?

How Plato split the world

Surely, the ancients reasoned, even though there's so much change (Many), some things must stay the same (One). Or does life swing between being ordered and coherent (One) and fragmented and chaotic (Many)? We aren't the first ones to feel like life goes back and forth between the two:

At one time they grew to be one alone from being many, and at another they grew apart again to be many from being one.[30]

EMPEDOCLES

The philosophers pondered whether something, somehow, might unify all the diversity they experienced. But what? This was the appeal of the four elements — earth, fire, air, and water. Perhaps individually, or as a whole, the elements were what held everything together.

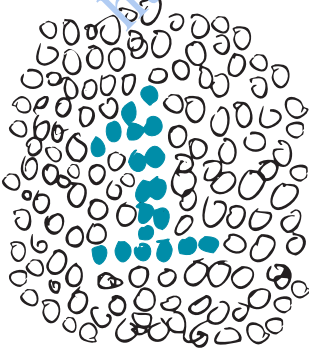
Then again, some argued, maybe life only looks ordered (One). Perhaps it's actually really fragmented and chaotic

and only change is constant (Many). Heraclitus thought so. Or maybe it's the exact opposite: that change is an illusion. That was Parmenides' choice. The pre-Socratic philosophers explored every possibility.

The solution put forward by Plato hugely influenced Western thought. Returning to our topic of justice, Plato argued that there is one true, eternal Form (Pure Idea) of Justice, and that every instance of justice we see is a poor copy of that Form. Likewise there is a Form of Goodness, and of Beauty, and of everything else that unifies our diverse experiences and ideas. Every single thing we see is a corrupted copy (Many) of a perfect original idea (One):

We distinguish between the many particular things which we call beautiful or good, and absolute beauty and goodness.[31]

PLATO



Sometimes we see the whole, the One.
Sometimes we see the parts, the Many.
Our eyes and mind move between both.

Plato's answer split the world in two. On the one hand, the Forms—pure ideas, eternal and unchanging. On the other hand, Matter—the changeable world of everyday experiences and things. Okay, time for a ditty: In Plato's scheme, Matter doesn't matter; only what isn't Matter, matters. (Did you get that?!)

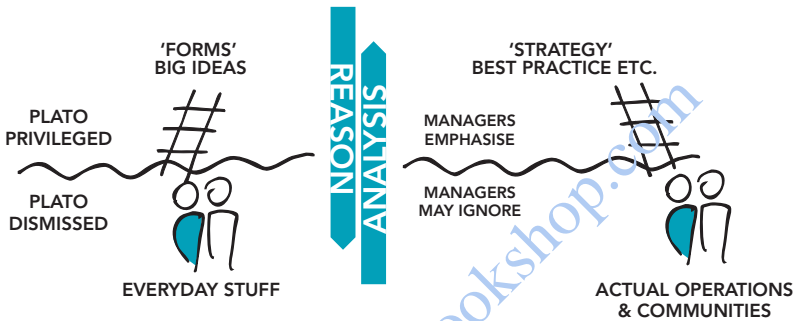
This strange answer mirrored society. Plato lived a privileged life in a city stratified from those who mattered (high rank) to those who didn't (low rank). I think we can link his theory with his life: Plato philosophised a picture of ultimate reality that mirrored his own privileged life as an educated man of rank.

This influential theory of a split world—philosophers call it dualism—yielded an 'upstairs downstairs' world view. Plato saw people as a microcosm of this split universe: each of us, he said, has a divine element (mind, soul) that grasps the Forms; but we are trapped within corrupt physical Matter (body). This idea reinforced the prejudice of those of high rank against those who 'worked with their own hands', a put-down that recurs in over a thousand years of classical literature.

Plato's vision of reality shaped and was shaped by his belief that we should place greater trust in reason than in our senses (mere 'opinion and irrational sensation'). Our senses are too caught up in Matter. Only reason, Plato believed, could let us distance ourselves enough from Matter to gain some knowledge of the Forms. More on reason later. For now, we note that wisdom holds in tension the parts and the whole, and that we need a fuller account of knowing than reason alone.

HOW TO PICK A SPLIT WORLD

Plato sold us a dud when he split the world into what matters and what doesn't. We keep buying it.



Plato's legacy lives on

Look for false distinctions about what's supposedly most 'real' and ways of knowing that are more 'true'.

You may hear forced distinctions like ...

- Reason vs emotion.
- Theory vs practice.
- Intellectual vs practical.
- Analysis vs imagination.
- Centralised vs decentralised.
- Best practice vs our best stories.
- Knowledge work vs craft work.

For Plato, reason was like a ladder: we must lift our thinking from what we see to the 'real truth' of pure ideas.

For managers, statistics, analysis, and models of best practice can seem 'higher' or more rational than the day-to-day realities of how people actually work and relate.

Plato's legacy shapes management

Look for ways analysis, models and plans are given more weight than what people actually say and do in context.

You may hear ideas like ...

- Importing 'world's best practice' without asking if it fits the context.
- Treating all 'problems' as solvable by right model + data + analysis.
- Using restructures to (supposedly) change how people think, work and 'engage' (i.e. 'cultural change').
- Ignoring the pride in craft of workers, calling them unengaged because our vision/mission/values hold no interest for them.

All possible brain work should be removed from the shop and centered in the planning or laying-out department.[32]

FREDERICK TAYLOR

Abstraction, or the curse of the school project

The gift and curse of abstraction

The Greek philosophers gave greater weight to ideas than to their expression. As philosophy and science became detached from people, '(the philosophers became) locked into an abstract cycle of debate in general terms, driven more by the sheer rationality of the tradition than by reference to any actual social situation'.[33]

The intellectual method of abstraction evolved. The idea is to extract the essence of something from the details — like a kernel from the husk. Linked to this is 'boxed' thinking: breaking things into categories (boxes) to put everything in its box. If something doesn't fit the box, it must be irrelevant.

In medicine, science, engineering, and more this thinking enabled amazing discovery and invention. But it can also reduce what is living and changing to fixed and clumsy categories:

If theory attempts to displace skill and understanding in concrete situations, it becomes first a nuisance and later a hindrance to both thought and action.[34]

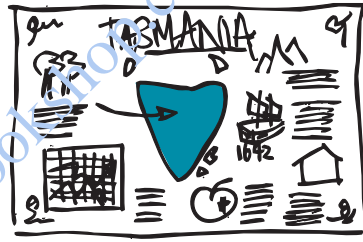
DAVID TRACY

Fighting an educational legacy

Do you remember doing 'projects' in early school? A collage of pictures and words arranged and decorated on a sheet of cardboard? Mum and Dad 'helping' at the kitchen table the night before it was due?

The topic was always broad, like 'Frogs' or 'Parliament' or 'Tasmania'. Occasionally we (or our parents!) got interested and learned something. But that was optional.

The real task was to fill up the sheet with anything we thought was relevant.



Moving to high school, we progressed to essays. Now we had to deal with plagiarism. We decided which quotes to footnote, discard, or 'put in our own words'. The game was the same: fill the essay with whatever we could find. Now there was a word count. Even at university the game was often still the same. I think we still do it.

Think of boring meetings, presentations, and reports. The slides are full of words and numbers but you can't find the point. The presenter says everything he thinks he should say, but there's no argument or key question. It's like a grown-up school project.

Great ideas need life. Cut the jargon. Find grounded questions. And turn those meetings into places of making.[35]

WISDOM TRANSLATES WELL THE PATTERNS OF LIFE

Wisdom helps us read complexity and ambiguity. Often balance is the need, but not always. What matters most is to translate wisdom well in each context.

Wisdom is not always balanced

The ancient Greeks believed that balance was the key to resolving the One and Many. Perfection for them was balance, moderation, lack of excess, harmony, the middle way. But balance, what they called the 'mean', is an abstract ideal that never occurs.

Half a world away from Athens, Mencius saw the problem well:

To lay hold of the mean without taking into account the occasion, is like grasping one thing only.[36]

MENCIUS

Balance is rarely the answer. What we need is the intellectual and emotional strength to hold both One and Many in tension. A wise path way well lie between two extremes, though sometimes an 'extreme' might be just what's needed. But the better path almost certainly does not lie in the middle.

Here's a simple example. At an offsite to set business plans for the next year, the agenda turned to sales forecasts. There was no shortage of spreadsheets. Then the auction started: 'Sales will be up by 20 per cent next year'. 'I think more like 10 per cent'. You guessed it, they settled for 15 per cent. (Funny isn't it how

no-one settles for an 'irrational' number like 16.486 per cent, yet it's all supposed to be based on analysis.) Meanwhile, several seasoned executives have the sinking feeling that the whole discussion is missing the realities of what's actually happening in the marketplace and internal operations.

Wisdom doesn't rush to such 'balanced' solutions. Wisdom can sit with ambiguity.

We don't need and can't have a complete view of anything. Rather, we move between the one and the many — the pattern or principle and the specifics of a given context — searching for insight.

What we need is the ability to consider things from multiple perspectives. This is the heart of thinking contextually and systemically. But only seeing patterns would make us armchair philosophers. Translating these patterns to the contexts around (and within) us takes us into engagement and action.

Wisdom requires the hard work of discerning context. From the storehouse of patterns we have observed, and the instinct to read the present, we choose and translate a particular line of speech or action to meet the challenges of the particular context.

Translating takes perspective

It's an iterative process

First we read the patterns: we attend to them and interpret them. Next we take the meaning we have seen and creatively bring these insights to our own contexts: we translate.

None of this happens like one, two, three. It is iterative. Reading, attending, interpreting, translating—all happen together.

We know by analogies and systems

Life is mind-bogglingly inter-connected. So is our knowledge of it. All our knowing uses analogy—we know something by reference to something else.

One of our most successful tricks is to bundle bits of this complexity together and call it a system. Thinking in analogies and systems is a great tool but limited.

We learn to multiply perspectives

Even the systems we create in our minds are too complex. One part of the system, or a big theme in how we think about the system, can serve as a perspective on the whole. Like looking at a scene through a window or pair of glasses.

Once we realise how perspectives enable us to see, we can become skilled at finding and shaping them. And we learn to multiply perspectives. We start to gain richer insights. Then whole new possibilities for interpretation and translation become possible.

Searching for perspective

1. Immerse yourself in what you're reading. You won't get it all.
2. Find the passion.
3. Move between looking at the whole (One) and parts (Many)—you can start with either.
4. Listen for key stories.
5. Listen for how your language, or others', opens up or shuts down your reading.
6. Try a metaphor. Make links. Sit with it. Don't get too attached. Expect it to change.
7. Ask if you have succumbed to the 'school project'—just saying everything. Put people back in the centre.
8. Try telling a new story. Watch if people come with you.



Themes can help us find perspective. Finding more themes multiplies perspectives.

THREE TESTS FOR STRATEGY

Maybe talking about patterns, One and Many, dualism, and abstraction seems too philosophical and impractical — especially to business. Here are three quick tests to see if these ideas really do have an impact on us today. For any strategy look for one or more of these fallacies:

1. The fallacy of balance

Sound familiar?

'Sales will be up by 20 per cent next year'.

'I think we can only expect 10 per cent'.

'Okay, we'll plan for 15 per cent'.

I have heard this kind of bargaining at the centre of many strategy and planning sessions. It seeks balance, or consensus.

There are always lots of numbers to back it up.

But we can be pretty sure the future is not going to lie in the middle of any set of numbers.

It looks rational. But it's not.

2. The fallacies of order and certainty

Sound familiar?

'Did we include all the data from all the sites?'

'No, some just didn't match the model'.

'So how do we know the model is right?'

'Well it fits the data we used'.

I have seen this kind of selective data used to make the most ambiguous context look ordered, bounded, and able to be analysed.

The spreadsheets seem irrefutable. Besides things look messy without them.

It looks analytical. But it's not.

3. The fallacy of presentation

Sound familiar?

'We've started a project.'

'How far are you?'

'Just beginning. What should we do?'

'A slide presentation'.

'What should I include?'

'Everything. Best Practice. Articles.

Lots of stats. Just cut-n-paste your last presentation'.

I have seen this kind of presentation convince a group they are ready for a solution when they haven't even started to explore the issue.

It looks professional. But it's not.

There are ways to shape intelligent, even wise, strategy. This is where we are headed.

Q. **Wisdom is so big.
Where do you start?**

- A. Personally I find it helpful to think in terms of attentiveness and presence. Wisdom asks me to pay attention to life; to notice and wonder and consider. Life is so big. Sometimes I can't start 'out there'; I have to start 'in here'. It isn't natural for me to pay attention or to be present to what is happening around and within me. I'm too busy. Too distracted. But sometimes, without warning, a door opens to wonder. I start to pay attention. Stillness becomes possible. I may find myself uncommonly present to others and to the world, its beauty and its travail. This is where my learning starts.

Wisdom stays open to the patterns of life

We know and we notice

We read and we translate that which comes to our attention. Or so it seems. Yet most knowing is tacit: we don't know what we know (more in *Chapter 3: Naming*). Indeed, we read far more than we realise: in a sense, we are always reading. Wisdom builds upon this knowledge that we absorb.

You can become blind by seeing each day as a similar one. Each day is a different one, each day brings a miracle of its own. It's just a matter of paying attention to this miracle.[37]

PAULO COELHO

To learn we must pay attention to life within us and beyond us. We must learn to discern the presence and significance of patterns, picking up nuance and subtlety, congruence and anomaly.

Attentiveness brings wisdom and it is urged in many traditions. We are asked to open our ears and eyes to the significance of the everyday:

Turn your ear to wisdom and apply your heart to understanding.[38]

My son, pay attention to my wisdom; turn your ear to my words of insight.[39]

SOLOMON

To be attentive is more than thinking. It is to draw near to engage, not to stand apart. It requires us to be present to what is emerging around us and within us. We enter into that which we seek

to know; whether ideas, events, other people, or even our own hearts.

If we liken reading life's patterns to making maps of reality, then our goal is not to be great map-makers, but to travel. There is an attentiveness to every facet of this: reading the terrain, drawing a map, locating ourselves, plotting a path, and journeying itself.

On staying open

Let yourself be open and life will be easier. A spoon of salt in a glass of water makes the water undrinkable. A spoon of salt in a lake is almost unnoticed.[40]

BUDDHA

If someone is able to show me that what I think or do is not right, I will happily change, for I seek the truth, by which no-one was ever truly harmed. It is the person who continues in his self-deception and ignorance who is harmed.[41]

MARCUS AURELIUS

It is never too late to give up our prejudices.[42]

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Open-mindedness should not be fostered because, as Scripture teaches, Truth is great and will prevail, nor because, as Milton suggests, Truth will always win in a free and open encounter. It should be fostered for its own sake.[43]

RICHARD RORTY

Attention is as varied as we are

'Pay attention!' Mrs Monaghan was my third grade teacher. For a sweet, kind teacher she had a wicked habit. She would sneak up behind anyone daydreaming and whack the desk with a three-foot ruler! She got me several times even though, due to illness, I wasn't at school all that often. Seems attentiveness wasn't a strong point for me.

Now I may just be making excuses but I'd like to think my inattentiveness in class masked an attentiveness of another kind. School certainly did not hold my attention; but life did.

I've known many children who were fascinated by life but not by school; my own included. I can't help feeling that the attentiveness valued at school is too often contrived. The goal seems to be compliance, not curiosity; an attentiveness without presence.

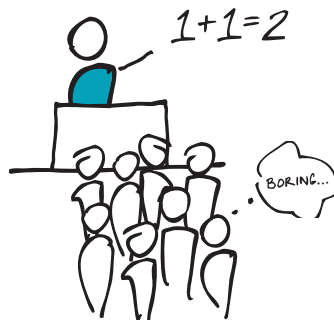
At its worst, a child may learn to pay enough attention to repeat what is given to her, without actually engaging with what is being offered.

Running a massive educational system will always work against this. But I do daydream about education that values and encourages the different ways that children attend to life and its patterns. I can't help but think it would help nurture integrity and care. That 'distracted' schoolgirl or boy may be enthralled with another 'curriculum'. Thankfully there are many, many teachers who know and nurture this deeper fascination.

So what can we say about attentiveness? Why some things more than others come to hold our attention is perhaps unfathomable. One thing's for sure, it's as varied as we are.

Tell me to what you pay attention and I will tell you who you are.[44]

JOSE ORTEGA Y GASSET



What we pay attention to may not be what is 'prescribed', but what is most valued.

THOUGHTS ON ATTENTIVENESS

People are attentive to life in different ways. For some it seems more about thinking. For others, more about feeling. I think it's always both. How do you attend to life?

I posted a question on Facebook: 'What comes to mind when you think of being attentive to life?' Here, with their permission, are my paraphrases of some of my connections' responses:

When curiosity meets empathy, we learn to attend to life and to each other.

RICHARD

Attentiveness is like a vulnerable embrace.

IMMANUEL

When we are thankful, stillness settles in us... (and) we may read life's patterns.

TARA

Attentiveness, encounter, vulnerability, gratitude, and curiosity are most present in the moment of giving and gift.

JOHN

Wisdom does not dissect life into parts. Perhaps wisdom is the way of the undivided life.

MEREDITH

Attention looks for wholes, for significance, for meaning. The contradictory and incoherent aspects of experience help hone this skill.

BRYCE

Attentiveness and presence takes the courage to look seriously into

the paradox of our own glory and brokenness.

JAYME

Think of the fracturing forces that have shaped our lives. Perhaps we are only able to face different things at different stages of life.

DAVID

Attentiveness and presence is not dissociation: it is the courage and vulnerability of being still and listening deeply.

EMMA

Speech is a kind of risk: to be attentive and present is to trust another and to guard the trust given in return.

SCOTT

Paradoxically, attentiveness helps us see life's 'non-patterns'—the discontinuities. Here too lie the things of wisdom and of what it is to be truly human.

KENNETH

Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?[45]

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

There is a lovely extra layer of meaning in what my friends have provided. Simply, we need others' insights.

Wisdom lives the patterns with integrity

Small stuff matters

Someone may read life well and have a fine sense of judgement. But if her personal integrity is questionable, we might call her clever or astute, but never wise. Wise leadership needs integrity.

If character is who we are when no-one can see us, then integrity is being the same person no matter who we are with or where we are. It is a living commitment to be true to oneself and to others equally.

If a man is correct in his own person, then there will be obedience without orders being given; but if he is not correct in his own person, there will not be obedience even though orders are given.[46]

CONFUCIUS

My dad taught me that two things test who I am:

First, who do I become when things go wrong? This is the test of truth: what is the truth of my life?

Second, who do I become when I am asked to do 'lesser' things? This is the test of humility: how do I really see myself in relation to others?

Anyone can appear to have integrity when things go well. But when things go wrong, then I'm put to the test.

Will I blame, or shift responsibility, or will I humbly acknowledge my

own shortcomings? Will I tear down individuals before their peers, or do I build up the whole? Will I feed gossip, or growth? Will I follow the crowd, or embrace the one who is shunned? These are tough choices.

Integrity reveals wisdom. But I think it runs much deeper. I think we learn what it is to be wise through every small choice to live with integrity.

Small stuff matters. The insights and choices that change us are likely to be small, unheralded, counter-intuitive, even paradoxical. These glimpses of everyday glory and brokenness—wonder, frailty, joy, grief, vulnerability, delight, shame—ground us in life, in integrity, in wisdom.

Practice yourself, for heaven's sake in little things, and then proceed to greater.[47]

EPICETUS

There are three topics in philosophy, in which he who would be wise and good must be exercised: that of the desires and aversions, that he may not be disappointed of the one, nor incur the other; that of the pursuits and avoidances, and, in general, the duties of life, that he may act with order and consideration, and not carelessly; the third includes integrity of mind and prudence, and, in general, whatever belongs to the judgment.[48]

EPICETUS

Wisdom lives the patterns with care

Always ask 'on behalf of' whom

Some words and phrases take us straight to the heart of things.

It was my privilege to work closely with the leaders of a large public education system. I heard leaders there use a little phrase — 'on behalf of' — to provoke serious reflection on policies, strategies, and initiatives.

How was such-and-such a policy, they asked, genuinely on behalf of teachers? How was a strategy genuinely on behalf of schools and their communities? How was a pedagogical or curriculum reform on behalf of children, their learning, and their futures? I learned that there is always an 'on behalf of' to consider.

The wise act with care. It is care that gives heart to their integrity and makes it more than duty. Like attentiveness, care can be starkly evident where we least expect it.

There is always tremendous power in genuine acts of care by people of high position who act without regard for their own status.



"THINK, SPEAK, ACT ... ON BEHALF OF"

What we care about defines who we are and how we act in the world. Wisdom is often evident in selfless acts of care.

Some years ago I was in an airport and noticed a woman shining shoes. I had never had my shoes shined and I had some time so I sat down. We started to talk. She was from Africa. All her family had been massacred except for three children. She had found her way to America with the remaining children about fifteen years before.

Trained as an engineer, the only work she had been able to get was shining shoes, and she had done it cheerfully to put all her children through university. She was a woman of extraordinary pain, dignity, courage, and faith. Her presence was powerful. She lived and worked 'on behalf of' her children. As she shined my shoes and we chatted that day, I had the sense that for those few minutes she was also there 'on behalf of' me.

It is care that makes the best students of the patterns of the world. It is care that moulds discernment and thoughtful application. It is care, love even, that sustains one's commitment to grow in wisdom and to live for a better world.

As the great Russian dissident and novelist observed:

It is a mistake to think that there are times when you can safely address a person without love. In the same way as you cannot work with bees without being cautious, you cannot work with people without being mindful of their humanity.[49]

LEO TOLSTOY

Q. **How does wisdom help you lead?**

- A. Wisdom is not a formula or process. Leaders know instinctively that it's the people stuff that matters most. But reading people is hard work. Where do we start? Wisdom nurtures attentiveness in us. We listen for the words that free people to give their best and those that rob them of the power to act. We look beyond assured explanations. We learn to give equal weight to unity and diversity, and to give up the illusion of balance. We learn not to panic at complexity and ambiguity. Nor to dumb things down. We begin to think and communicate by stories more than by abstract definitions. These are some of the ways wisdom helps me lead. But we've only just begun to address that question.



Dr Mark Strom

KEYNOTES. RETREATS. CONSULTING.

Thousands of leaders have heard Mark's keynote addresses or participated in his leadership seminars in Australia, New Zealand, Asia, Europe, and North America.

His retreats, based on the material in *Lead with Wisdom*, are unique learning experiences acclaimed by leaders in many sectors.

Mark has consulted to commercial corporations, government bodies, not-for-profits, and individual leaders. His expertise lies at the intersection of strategy and leadership, the reframing of innovation and engagement initiatives, and the creation of leadership programs for senior leaders.

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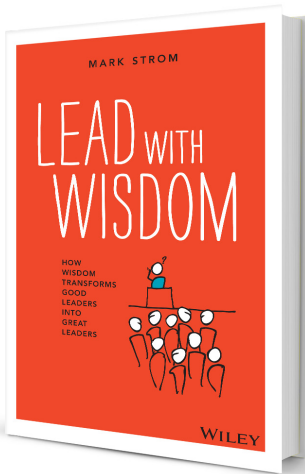
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great leaders

by Mark Strom



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The Book

A practical guide for leading others with wisdom, integrity, and humanity.

This book argues that great leadership requires wisdom. Rather than a formulaic managerial approach to leadership, *Lead with Wisdom* presents the case for leadership based on our shared humanity and the stories that unite us. What emerges is a model of leadership based on learning to read key patterns of human experience: the way language shapes our reality, how we form new meaning through conversation, how relationships determine influence and how we deal with uncertainty.

It presents readers with the tools and illustrated examples to implement the four arts of leading wisely: how to draw out and create a new story in the organisation, how to find and leverage the brilliance of people, how to speak with promise to restore meaning and hope, and how to show grace in dealing with the most demanding people and circumstances.

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Wisdom is the ability to discern and act on meaningful patterns in human experience. As philosopher of leadership Mark Strom explains, it is the defining quality that makes the difference between a good leader and a great one.

Lead with Wisdom draws upon the richest ideas from history's greatest thinkers, showing how we can shape our lives through words, relationships, conversations, stories, and much more. This results in powerful lessons on how to leverage the insights of wisdom for deep, even game-changing, results.

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