

MANFRED F. R. KETS DE VRIES

leading wisely



BECOMING A
REFLECTIVE LEADER IN
TURBULENT TIMES

WILEY

Leading Wisely

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Becoming a Reflective Leader
in Turbulent Times

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Preface

By three methods we can learn wisdom. First, by reflection which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.

—Confucius.

All truly wise thoughts have been thought already thousands of times; but to make them truly ours, we must think them over again honestly, until they take root in our personal experience.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Being foolish

Aristotle is often attributed with the statement, ‘There is a foolish corner in the brain of the wisest man.’ One cannot help but wonder if he was thinking of something comparable to the idea of the so-called Darwin Awards competition. If you do not know what I am referring to, let me explain. The ‘Darwin Award’ is a rather tongue-in-cheek honor given to people who have singled themselves out by stupidly risking life and limb in the dumbest way possible. To be selected for this award, the following criteria must apply:

In the spirit of Charles Darwin, the Darwin Awards commemorate individuals who protect our gene pool by making the ultimate sacrifice of their own lives by eliminating themselves in an extraordinarily idiotic manner, thereby improving our species' chances of long-term survival.

In other words, the candidate's foolishness must be unique and sensational. In fact, if the Darwin Awards does prove anything at all, it is that even presumably intelligent people can remove themselves from the gene pool in apparently ridiculous ways.

I remember how I could well have received an honorable citation for the Darwin Awards while canoeing with my wife and two children on the Concord River in Massachusetts. Due to the fast-melting snow, the river had completely flooded its banks. Large parts of what used to be land were now inundated. While happily paddling between the many trees that were now standing in the water, we came across a large, low hanging branch that was blocking our passage. Showing no judgement at all, I told everyone in the canoe to lean to one side to be able to pass under that branch, with the obvious result that the canoe keeled over and everyone suddenly spilled into the water. It was an amazingly stupid suggestion on my part.

Soaking wet, I fished the children out of the water and, for reasons of safety, put them on this infamous branch. Together with my wife – as we were able to stand in the overflowed river – we tilted the canoe to pour out the water. Subsequently, the two of us, completely soaked, paddled back to the shore like mad. When we got into our car, we put on maximum heat and drove home to Cambridge as fast as possible. We were lucky that we did not drown or catch pneumonia, but in future canoeing expeditions, I kept

William Blake's admonition in mind: 'A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees.' I had learned something the hard way. I had learned from experience. Never was such an accident going to happen to me again. In the future, I would have better judgement. In future actions, I would try to be wiser.

Beyond book learning

Even though I wrote this book only recently, in more than one way, these musings on wisdom in the context of leadership have been in the works for a very long time. In fact, it is fair to say that this book reflects the ruminations of my own struggles with foolishness, all the while trying to acquire a touch of wisdom. Although book learning has always been important to me, knowledge alone never seemed to be enough in dealing with many of the questions that I faced in my daily work as a professor, psychoanalyst, consultant and executive coach. Although I always thought that to acquire knowledge, studying does not hurt, to acquire wisdom, clearly something more was needed. Making efforts to appear knowledgeable did not seem to be good enough. Among other things, I realized that I needed to learn how to observe. If I wanted to act wisely, I needed to really make sense of what was going on around me. Fortunately, in that respect, my long psychoanalytic training turned out to be very useful.

Apart from needing to become more proficient in seeing things, much of what I have learned in life has also come to pass through the questioning of my students. These demanding interchanges – because, far too often, it had to do

with questions to which there were no easy answers – were a good lesson in humility. Again and again, these discussions reminded me of my ignorance – it showed how little I really did know. In hindsight, I realized that I became even more aware of my limitations in sense making when I designed a program for C-suite executives at INSEAD, where I have been teaching for a very long time. Working with cohorts of C-suite executives from all over the globe proved to be even more of a challenge, compared to working with the much younger MBA students. Very often, the latter tended to be more gullible, while in many instances, the older executives would present me with extremely complex problems for which I had no easy answers.

For pedagogical reasons, most business schools use case studies. My approach has not been very different from that of the Harvard Business School – the epicenter of case studies – which is one of my alma maters. During a lifetime influenced by their pedagogical approach, I must have written over a hundred of these case studies. Frankly speaking, case studies have always been an excellent way to create the illusion of decision-making omnipotence – to provide students with the fantasy that they could tackle any difficult problem. Certainly, I was no exception, having once had similar illusions. After all, I had also at one time done an MBA. However, in this particular seminar, specifically designed for leaders of organizations, my approach became somewhat different. In this instance, I decided to take advantage of the fact that the interesting case studies were sitting right in my class. I came to realize that using my participants as prospective study subjects allowed me and others in the class to engage in a more in-depth way of sense making, compared to the traditional case study approach.

I should add that most case studies about senior executives are of a somewhat hagiographic nature, something I am very aware of, given my own case writing history. Why this is so, is that the protagonists in these case studies generally have ‘the final cut’, enabling them to take out of the case any information they do not fancy. Unfortunately, by doing so, the ‘nerve is often taken out of the material’. In addition, to add to this ‘cleansing process’, I should mention the case writer’s tendency towards self-censorship, his or her not wanting to include material that may seem to be too controversial, exactly because of the existence of this right of final cut. Furthermore, if truth be told, based on my own experience, it is rather rare for executives to truly open up in these case studies – to talk frankly about what is really troubling them. Getting them to go deep enough to tell a more complete story about the challenges they are facing in their lives is always an uphill struggle. After all, it is so much safer to keep the conversation at a rather superficial level.

In the seminars I designed, however, hagiography was not something that had a long life span. As the objective of the program is to help participants develop deeper insights about themselves – to find ways to navigate through life’s challenging situations – staying merely on the surface is not really an option. It would be difficult to keep the discussions going by remaining at a superficial level. As a matter of fact, it would be a real waste of time. Yet, most participants tended to open up, as their defenses wore down. Gradually, they would pay more heed to the statement ‘no interpretation without association’. They would come to realize that if they kept the discussion merely at a superficial level, they would not get much out of such a seminar. To go beyond superficialities was in their best interest. Of course, what

facilitated the process of having the participants really open up was that their colleague-participants were becoming increasingly effective in identifying what was happening beneath the surface. As time went by, what would come to the surface were the real issues that the person ‘in the hot seat’ was trying to deal with.

During these sessions, many insightful questions, reflections and insights would come to the fore. Although there is nothing bad about learning from one’s own experience, learning from the experience of others can be of equal merit. Looking back, having facilitated these kinds of seminars for a very long time, I can only say that it has been a great learning adventure. Much wisdom was always present during these sessions.

More than a decade ago, encouraged by what I learned from my students during these seminars, I wrote a book with the title, *Sex, Money, Happiness, and Death: Musings from the Underground*, where I reflected on the insights provided to me by my participants. Quite recently, as the COVID-19 pandemic has offered me much more time for reflection, this particular book has been followed by five others: *Journeys into Coronavirus Land: Lessons from a Pandemic*; *The CEO Whisperer: Meditations on Leadership, Life and Change*; *Quo Vadis?: The Existential Challenges of Leaders*; *Leadership Unhinged: Essays on the Ugly, the Bad and the Weird* and *Dancing on Quicksand: The Daily Perils of Executive Life*. Looking back, one important issue that runs like a red thread through these three books is how to make wise decisions.

A ‘clinical’ orientation

The importance of wisdom as a guiding principle led me to reflect on the kind of conceptual schemes that I have been using in trying to make sense of the stories my participants would tell me. This pertains to the question of what kind of lenses I apply to understand the deeper meaning of what my participants are dealing with. Added to this is another question of particular importance: while using these lenses, how can I weave together into a cohesive pattern the emerging thoughts, feelings and behavior patterns that come my way?

To start with, as a management professor, there is my knowledge of organizational life. However, to only use this organizational lens to help understand what the executives in my seminars are trying to present would provide a rather one-sided, two-dimensional picture of their lives. Therefore, I have found another lens to be extremely useful. It came from putting on my hat as a psychoanalyst. Through the use of a more psychodynamic-systemic oriented lens – thus having a more clinical orientation to the making sense of things – I began to pay attention to not only what is happening in people’s lives on the surface but also what is happening beneath the surface. After all, as a clinician, I have always been interested not only in conscious phenomena, but also in what happens at an unconscious level. Putting on this more ‘clinical’ hat has always been an important part of my way of making sense of the world. It helped me to deal better with the ‘wisdom equation’, to become more reflective in my decision making.

Wisdom and society

By and large, people who realize the importance of wisdom will make better decisions during their life's journey. They appreciate how wisdom can be an enabler. They realize the importance of wise decisions for their individual and social well-being. They realize that, without wise decisions, their societies will be at risk, but they are also quite aware of how much wisdom is still lacking in our present-day world, despite our great advances in knowledge.

It is for all to see that, on a fundamental level, the tragedy of the human condition has not lessened. We still are not able to get things right. *Homo sapiens* continues to make a mess of things. Presently, our sense of alienation – manifested through feelings of powerlessness, normlessness, and meaninglessness – appears to be at an all-time high. Fear, anxiety, and depression are ever-present, and related to this flood of emotional distress, epidemics of addictive behavior can be seen everywhere. Added to this sorry state of affairs, we are still living in a world full of conflict with large groups of people still exposed to much starvation and war. Sadly enough, the only difference between the past and the present seems to be the difference between throwing stones and shooting high powered, nuclear missiles. Notwithstanding these tragic developments, many of us live with the illusion that if we were to amass just a little bit more knowledge, everything would be all right. Unfortunately, very little thought is given to the greater accumulation of wisdom – how to make wiser decisions.

Sadly enough, while we are living in an information society where knowledge is omnipresent, we are still living in a

world where wisdom is direly lacking. Clearly, in our current world, we are able to gather information and knowledge at a much faster rate than we are able to gather wisdom. Referring again to the idea of a ‘wisdom equation’ in leadership, there is no question but that wise leaders are rare and far between. Many of our present leaders are everything but paragons of wisdom. Frankly speaking, far too many of them are not up to the challenge. They are behaving more like actors in a reality show, trying to peddle their illusions. They are catering to what people ‘wish to believe’, but are unable to give wise council to their citizens. Populists as they are, many of them promise unrealistic, overly simplistic miracle cures to deal with the ills of society. They seem to be in the ‘fan fiction’ business, creating fantasy facts and alternative realities. It seems that the ignorant and the belligerent have the upper hand, and it is easy to recognize that in their actions, wisdom is direly lacking. Even worse, it often seems that the less wisdom they show, the more popular they are. The fewer facts they present, the more they push ‘dream politics’, the more they are applauded. The more factoids they present, invented out of thin air, the more they dazzle their followers.

These demagogue-like leaders are not concerned about what is in the best interest from a communal/societal point of view. They are not interested in the common good. Far too many of them only seem to be in pursuit of their self-interest. In other words, they are just looking out for number one. If we take a hard look at their behavior, it would become clear that most of them lack a moral compass. They are anything but value driven. However, where they do excel is in their capacity to take advantage of the dearth of wisdom among their followers. They seem to be acutely aware of the fact that

wisdom does not emerge out of collective ignorance, but aiming for the lowest *Zeitgeist* denominator is not the answer to solving the complex problems that humankind is facing.

Many of these leaders seem to have forgotten that the greatness of a nation is not measured in dollars and cents but in human decency. What makes a country great should not be a simple transactional calculation. To be possessed by the forces of selfishness and greed – individual or national – is not the answer in dealing with the serious ills of society. On the contrary, well-functioning societies have a set of values that define them.

It is quite disturbing that in these very turbulent times, when enlightened leadership is needed more than ever, a country's citizens – confused and excited as they may be – are more likely to respond to the siren calls of these demagogue-like leaders while refusing to listen to the voice of wisdom. The results are there for all to see. Unfortunately, as has been said all too often, hundreds of wise men cannot make the world a heaven, but one idiot is enough to turn it into a hell. The philosopher Bertrand Russell put it quite astutely: 'The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people so full of doubts.'

All in all, the main reason I am writing this book about wisdom is that in this confusing world of ours, characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, I am trying to make a plea for more wisdom in leadership. As I have suggested, looking at the state of the world, many of our present leaders are not the role models we would like to emulate. On the contrary, we need different kinds of leaders. I am referring to the kinds of people who prefer love above hatred,

who are able to foster harmony, instead of divisiveness, who are advocates of peace, not of war, and who prefer to build bridges, not walls. Furthermore, we should be on the lookout for leaders of integrity, who advocate justice, not corruption and lawlessness. While I may sound naïve, I am also referring to the kinds of leaders for whom concepts like freedom, care, values and character do matter. We should never forget that freedom flourishes upon the bedrock of ethics and integrity, not hypocrisy. In particular, we need leaders who build social trust, not distrust. In high trust societies, good things happen. Leaders who cherish these values will be the life blood of any true democracy.

In our present-day world characterized by a pandemic, global warming, nuclear threats, terrorism and dramatic income inequalities, we need more than ever leaders who are interested in promoting knowledge and wisdom, not ignorance. We need leaders who transcend people's wish to believe. I am referring to the kind of people who are reality driven, who have a solid grasp of what is possible and are interested in doing things for the common good. It is exactly this kind of leadership that will prevent us from entering doomsday scenarios.

Notwithstanding the many threats that we are facing in this day-and-age, far too many people still do not realize the importance of wisdom for the advancement of humanity. They do not realize that time is running out if we want to save our planet. It is here exactly where wise leaders can make a difference. When leaders possess a degree of wisdom, their actions can contribute to real transformation, a process that is not merely a redecoration of the past but a transformation of humanity that embodies the eternally new.

My agenda

As I have mentioned before, this book should be seen within the context of my discussions with my students about what lessons of life have been important to them in running their organizations. I kept on asking them, as a leader, what would they do to be more effective? What could they do to contribute to creating a better world? What words of wisdom had stuck with them?

In distilling the essence of these discussions, for reasons of simplicity, I have decided to limit myself to eight lessons that pertain to wisdom in the context of leadership and other life challenges. I am quite cognizant of the fact that I could have included more lessons on wisdom, but many of the additional lessons are intertwined within the others. Wisdom, in the end, is a kind of enigma and we need to recognize that from the start. To that end, I have added three chapters upfront where I present some of my more general reflections pertaining to the wisdom equation.

Furthermore, to clarify even more what I want to say, I have included many short stories and anecdotes originating from China, Japan, the Middle East and Europe. The main protagonists in these stories are the Buddha, Zen masters, Aesop (a storyteller believed to have lived in ancient Greece) and mullah Nasrudin (a wise man born in present-day Turkey). Also, included are anecdotes from the Old Testament, the brothers Grimm and a few more contemporary tales. In addition, in each chapter I have added a number of questions to help the reader further explore the various themes that are being discussed.