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Brussels, October 11, 2012

It is not new to speak of wisdom in the context of leadership and management

I want to **structure this brief introduction** to what I have called the Arts of the Wise Leader **in two parts**

1. My journey into noticing a need for wisdom in corporate life
2. My (current) way of framing ways of bringing wisdom to corporate life

We must begin at the beginning. I see wisdom as:

1. Ways of being and knowing by which we indwell and read the patterns of life insightfully — *patterns of ourselves, of each other, and of the wider world*, and
2. Ways we bring this indwelling and insight to specific contexts with discernment and nuance, integrity and care.

What am I trying to embrace with this tentative definition?

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

Hard as it is to define, we know wisdom when we see it. We bring to mind those whom we believe have made the world a better place. We recall those who touched our own lives for good.

Perhaps, like love, we know wisdom more tacitly than overtly: we know more than we can say. We know love, and wisdom, as much by its absence as its presence, and we can discern the genuine article from pretence.

Thus the wisdom traditions use the fool as a counterpoint (a method and topic I did not see in the literature). And, like love, we long for the ways wisdom enriches and completes us.

What then is the value of wisdom for life within corporations?

Recent appeals to wisdom in this context tend to emphasise one or both of two themes:

1. Wisdom as concerned with the character and actions of the individual who is expected to lead and to manage
2. Wisdom as roughly synonymous or coextensive with ethics

Both have value and both mislead:

Wisdom, like love, directs us beyond ourselves. But there is more to say about wisdom than the wisdom of an individual for others. There is also the wisdom of others

The reduction of wisdom to individuals, to leadership, even to teams, and to ethics has made it the preserve of HR.

But If, as I will argue, wisdom directs us to a fuller appreciation of and participation with life, then wisdom may have much to say to corporate life about strategy, innovation, design, engagement and much more

This is what I want to address as the subjects of wisdom:

1. the individual (still)
2. the community of practice, and
3. the intrinsic meaningfulness and beauty of work.

But, like all the ancient wisdom traditions, we also need to address the foolishness of corporate life.

I should explain how I have come to this:

Indirectly. Serendipitously. Reluctantly

My career needs explanation though time does not permit tonight:

1. truck driver to PhD in the history of ideas
2. information design to strategy
3. strategy to leadership

I am a most reluctant 'expert' in strategy

There are three strands nestled within this crude chronology:

1. existential quest for meaning that arose within a childhood marked by sickness
2. academic life that began in theology but moved to philosophy and history
3. the disposition of a story-teller: I value immersion over abstract explanation

As my friend and I immersed ourselves within the life of corporations—commercial, state and NGO—we noticed these patterns

Categorizing that inhibits vitality	Naming that is strong and true
Communication that invites no thought	Conversation that creates new shared meaning
Appeals to formal authority to influence	Influence through relationship
The systematizing of personality	The formation of Character
Abstract (ir)rationality	Story as the crucible of identity
Default to conformity	Respect and room for Brilliance
Inauthentic speech	A Promise to carry integrity and hope
Elitism	Grace to honour, respect and care

The more attention I gave to this contrast, the more I saw two things:

1. that the dispositions and behaviours of the left hand column distort, suppress, substitute for, and parody those on the hand column, and
2. that the dispositions and behaviours of the right hand column are crucial to intelligently relational and contextual strategy, innovation, and engagement

Moreover, these are patterns of human life always shaping our working lives:

[Slide with patterns and arts]

Indeed they are marks of leading and managing wisely

This may seem counter-intuitive. But consider these reflections:

- Many strategies are in fact irrational and ineffectual — the vision is contrived
- Many cultural change programs are acontextual and ineffectual — the values and structural changes are contrived
- Many innovation programs are elitist and ineffectual — the models and pathways are contrived
- Many empowerment programs are patronising and ineffectual — the experiences are contrived

The two most irrational and disempowering words one can ever hear in a boardroom are: "Prove it!" The future cannot be proved. It is an act of imagination.

Wisdom urges us toward more humanity, not more sophisticated metrics and models. But more humanity does not equal 'fluffiness'. Indeed it is more rational.

Next cycle speakers (see philoma.org – agenda)

Sébastien Henry — Seminar 1: “Obedience, intuition & frugality – the way of the monks?”

Fabrice Midal — Seminar 2: “Elegance, generosity & justice – the way of the knights?”

Jacques Castermane — Seminar 3: “Simplicity, humility & inner calm – the way of techniques?”

Cynthia Fleury — Seminar 4: “Courage, naming & promise – the way of democratic groups?”

Pascale Molinier — Seminar 5: “Care, character & grace – the way of women?”

Emmanuel Toniutti — Seminar 6: “Dialogue, influence & authority – the way of three great sages?”

Surya Tahora — Seminar 7: “Objectivity, discernment & insight – the way of Vedanta?”

Mike Thompson — Closing conference: “Wisdom: ethical foundation for managerial decision-making?”