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Leadership and Wisdom

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Katalin Illes: Leadership and Wisdom

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Introduction

O' Higgins and Zsolnai (2018 p.302) argue that “The much disturbed Earth-Human system requires organizations whose primary objectives and criteria of success include the “Commonwealth of Life” (Brown, 2015), that is the flourishing of human, nonhuman, and future life on Earth.”

Organisations are urged to review how they operate and make every effort to be more embedded both in the environment and in society where they operate (Boda and Zsolnai, 2016). Although most organisations express some sort of engagement with Corporate and Social Responsibility, it is often reduced to a functional and instrumental management concept and creates an ethics management paradox (Bouckaert (2006). When rational and technocratic management tools are used genuine moral feelings and genuine moral commitments are suppressed.

How can organisations be encouraged to think more progressively, more long-term and more responsibly about their operations? A considerable contribution could come from the leadership of corporations. Leaders have both the position power and the opportunity to change cultures, mindsets, priorities and operations.

Most people would agree that the world needs wise leaders. There are numerous examples of corruption, greed, self-centredness, short-sightedness and foolish actions. These demonstrate the lack of wisdom and the lack of responsible leadership. Wisdom similar to trust is an elusive concept, difficult to define and we often start thinking about it when it is missing. Wisdom is not boastful, it is not self-serving, it is unassuming and when it is present it has a calming and uplifting influence on people and events.

Wisdom and right action do not automatically come with age (Yang, 2014). One needs to get to know oneself, observe one's own behaviour, learn from personal experiences and the experiences of others, and develop a habit of acting with self-discipline and moral values. Going to a good school or a highly rated university and progressing rapidly in a career will not automatically make someone a wise person or a revered leader who can resist the temptation of the ego and the environment. To become wise one needs to take life seriously both as a leader and as a human being.

“We need...people of the highest integrity, committed to building enduring organizations. We need leaders who have deep sense of purpose and are true to their core values. We need leaders who have the courage... to meet the needs of all their stakeholders, and who recognize the importance of their service to society.” (George, 2003. P.5)

Evidence across disciplines, centuries and cultures show that moral values are important in leadership and leadership formation. The plural nature of today's society is not a reason to avoid discussion and development of moral values rather it increases the capacity to be mindful of the moral dimension of individual actions.

There is no shortage of leaders' memoirs in the bookstores or online. These take the reader through a personal life journey and distil the lessons of a successful career into nuggets of wisdom, guiding principles as recommendations for others. Although some of the memoirs are thought provoking and resonate with the reader one also notices that life journeys are different and meaning and purpose can only be found individually.

This paper outlines some of the more recent developments in the leadership literature and how it is connecting with the research on wisdom. The concept of leadership as practice is discussed and the idea of leadership as a meta-profession is proposed. The final part of the paper explores how wisdom and wise leadership can receive more prominence in development programmes.

Leadership and Wisdom

Leadership is one of the most discussed and most researched phenomena. There is no shortage of definitions, models, conceptual frameworks, lists of competencies and qualities that are required from effective, efficient, charismatic and successful leaders. There are larger than life CEOs with larger than life egos and astronomical remuneration packages who seem infallible until they fall and disappear from the limelight. And there are quiet leaders across organisations. They work in challenging situations and negotiate through complex relationships.

“Never have so many laboured so long to say so little. Multiple interpretations of leadership exist, each providing a sliver of insight but each remaining as incomplete and wholly inadequate explanation.” (Bennis and Nanus, 1997 p.4)

Why is it so?

Maak and Pless (2006) suggest three reasons why there are so many discrepancies about leadership:

1. It is assumed that people who take on leadership positions have a high sense of responsibility so they do not need guidance.
2. Leadership is often mixed up with management and the leader is someone who motivate others to do things effectively
3. There is *an industrial paradigm* (Rost, 1991) in leadership research. It imposes a leadership effectiveness focus on researchers and it denies that leadership is a normative phenomenon.

It assumes that leadership research is value-free. As a leader one is expected to behave ethically but it is treated as a given, something that comes through upbringing and education so it has no room in scientific research.

In recent decades, leadership theory has embraced the dynamics of 'leading' people as a relational, continuously evolving social phenomenon. Some theories have approached leadership as driven by complex communication (Rindova et al., 2006). Others have explored institutional forces that constrain the decision-making power of individuals in executive positions. There are also accounts of the dark side of 'good' leaders (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Recent developments in leadership theory have accounted for the critical role of followership and focused upon the concepts of the servant leader (Grint, 2005; Spears & Lawrence, 2002), humility (Morris et al., 2005; Owen & Hekman, 2012; Argandona,

2015), moral values (Gerard, 2017), spirituality (Fairholm & Fairholm, 2009; Cacioppe, 2000), mindfulness (Sinclair, 2012) and wisdom (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2011).

There is a call for taking a broad view of leadership and include not only high profile roles but also every day cases where people “lead quietly” (Badaracco 2002. 2) at different levels of responsibility. They face dilemmas, ambiguity and need to take action. (Shotter, and Tsoukas, 2014). When one ‘leads quietly’, one needs to consider conflicting values and priorities, there are no pre-established patterns to follow, the context is given and one has to work with continuously evolving events.

Shotter and Tsoukas call for Phronetic leaders who in an Aristotelian spirit demonstrate practical wisdom and prudence. Phronetic leaders developed a “refined capacity to come to an intuitive grasp of the most salient features of an ambiguous situation and, in their search for a way out of their difficulties, to craft a particular path of response in moving through them, while driven by the pursuit of the common good.” (Shotter, and Tsoukas, 2014. p.225)

Flyvbjerg (2001) developed a strong argument for basing social science on the foundation of the Aristotelian concept of phronesis. For Aristotle *phronesis* is a “true state, reasoned, and capable of action with regard to things that are good or bad for man.” (Aristotle, 1976). “*Phronesis* goes beyond both analytical, scientific knowledge (*episteme*) and technical knowledge or know-how (*techne*) and involves judgements and decisions made in the manner of a virtuoso social and political actor. ...*phronesis* is commonly involved in social science, and that therefore attempts to reduce social science and theory either to *episteme* or *techne*, or comprehend them in those terms, are misguided.” (Flyvbjerg, 2001. p. 2).

Aristotelian approaches have long promoted the responsibility of practical wisdom and an inherent capacity to judge as the fundamental conditions for ‘good’ leadership. Nonaka & Takeuchi (2010) define wise leadership as the ability to handle situations, share knowledge and stimulate values, rather than just achieving performance results. However, this wisdom, founded on such values, does not have the same effect within many contemporary contexts as cleverness – that is the demonstration of specific technical knowledge. As Revans astutely remarked: “The Clever man will tell you what he knows; he may even try to explain it to you. The wise man encourages you to discover it for yourself even although he knows it inside out himself. But since he seems to give you nothing, we have no need to reward him. Thus, the wise have disappeared and we are left in the desolation of the clever.” (quoted in R. Revans, *Action Learning: New Techniques for Management*, London, Blond and Briggs, 1980. p.9).

Revans’ distinction between cleverness and wisdom clearly illustrates the imbalance between the intellectual virtues of instrumental-rationality and value-rationality. Redressing the balance is timely as value-rationality is vital to the happiness of citizens in any society (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

The imbalance between scientific instrumental rationality and value-rationality is noticeable in the field of leadership studies. Although some authors use qualitative methods and probe into the complexities and the nature of leadership with the help of narratives, observations and stories many of the studies both in the field of leadership and wisdom use quantitatively analysed data in searching for the right ingredients of highly effective leadership.

Sternberg (2003) argues that to be a highly effective leader one needs to synthesize intelligence, creativity and wisdom. He distinguishes between academic and practical

intelligence and argues that tacit knowledge is gained through experience and it is difficult to measure. Creativity enables one to generate ideas and products that are relatively novel, high in quality and appropriate to the task at hand. In his view creativity is a decision so one only needs to decide to be creative if one wants to be creative.

There are many definitions of wisdom. They emerge primarily from philosophy and psychology. The word philosophy itself means the ‘love of wisdom’ in Greek ‘philo’ means love and ‘sophia’ means wisdom. Plato identified three types of wisdom: Sophia, phronesis and episteme. Sophia is practiced by those who seek contemplative life in search of truth. Phronesis is a practical wisdom demonstrated typically by judges, lawyers and statesmen. Episteme is a scientific understanding. (Robinson, 1990 and 1989).

Socrates said that wisdom “consists of realising one’s own ignorance, the knowing of what one does not know.” In the Old Testament, wisdom is characterised by a sense of lawfulness, personified in the wise King Solomon. In Eastern philosophy wisdom is associated primarily with Confucius and the Buddha. Confucius believed that wisdom can be achieved through reflection, imitation and experience. And the Buddha said that wise people are blessed with good bodily conduct, verbal conduct and mental conduct. He taught that “A wise person, does actions that are unpleasant to do but give good results and doesn’t do actions that are pleasant to do but give bad results.” (quoted in Davis, 2010. p. 5.)

Ardelt (2004, 2008) defined wisdom as a personality characteristic that integrates cognitive, reflective and affective personality qualities. He argues that a person has to be willing to learn from life’s lessons and to be transformed in the process in order to develop wisdom.

Gluck and Bluck (2014) defined wisdom as a personal resource used to negotiate life’s challenge. Using their scale (MORE) they measured mastery, openness, reflexivity, emotional regulation and empathy. They argue that the higher one’s score is the more one is able to develop wisdom from life changes.

Davis, R.A. (2010) reflects on his work with executives and offers the following ten intangibles of leadership: Wisdom, will, executive maturity, integrity, social judgement, presence, self-insight, self-efficacy, fortitude and fallibility. He illustrates his points with brief case studies and examples.

Sauers (2017) argues that leading cannot be explained by a set of virtues, sentences or verbs alone. The act of leading is so complex and continuously changing that it cannot be reduced to some generalised principles it needs to be examined and experienced in practice.

Leadership as Practice (L-A-P)

Leadership theory has been advancing towards an understanding of leadership practice that does not focus entirely on the individual traits of leaders or their actions to explain the sustainability of organizations. Raelin’s (2016) edited volume on leadership practice offers the foundations of a new approach to leadership. Leadership as practice “depicts immanent collective action emerging from mutual, discursive, sometimes recurring and sometimes evolving patterns in the moment over time among those engaged in the moment and over time among those engaged in the practice. “ (Raelin, 2016. p.3.) Here the emphasis is on the practice not the practitioners. It is based on a process perspective and focuses in practice as it unfolds with the underlying belief that leadership occurs as a practice rather than reside in the traits or behaviours of individuals. Leadership-as-practice is less about what one person

thinks or does and more about what people may accomplish together. It is thus concerned with how leadership emerges and unfolds through day-to-day experience.

This approach is not only driven by a philosophical investigation of what practice theory can offer to leadership studies, it is also linked with a growing body in leadership theory that observes the 'leader' as a humble individual, a servant, or someone who mobilises resources and needs to engage with followers in order to be able to trigger change within complex systems. Such conceptualisation focuses on the need for a leader to go through a process of personal transformation (Blanchard, 1993: 109) and consider organisational life as a member of the community. The leader needs to deal with the moments, situations and emerging events while also being herself/ himself within a context of institutionalised habits and existing routines.

There are three critical aspects of the leader within a practice context: constructing shared meanings, stimulating creative thinking and maintaining a clear ethical consciousness.

Things happen and change happens in unpredictable ways. The role of the leader is to establish a process of sense-making, allowing individuals to understand the events and what they mean to them (Weick, 1999). In this sense the leader acts as an interpreter.

Leadership is also based on humility (Morris et al., 2005) and followership (Ladkin, 2010). The humble leader appreciates the limitations of power and uses power purposefully and wisely. Practice-driven leadership requires the individual to be ethically robust and morally prepared to handle complex events.

Leadership as practice and the resulted leadership characteristics (sense giving, humility and wisdom) leave leadership theory with a wide normative question mark. Is it possible to organise this leadership perspective within a practical and professional framework?

In a structured society where calculability and predictability have dominated social practice it would be hardly surprising to see the dominance of cleverness and the gradual disappearance of wisdom. Professionalization of certain domains of practice is still intrinsically linked to highly structured perceptions of obligations, and a framed view of ethical responsibilities. Herein lies the problem of a prescriptive approach on professionalism. The communicative nature of work and the competing loyalties and responsibilities towards different social groups cannot be encompassed by a prescriptive code of conduct. Even simpler vocations and social roles cannot be comprehensively and easily placed under a technical framework and a set of guidelines. Leadership is a complex social role that does not fit easily into simplistic technical frameworks or guidelines.

However, scandals and leadership misbehaviour makes it rather timely to raise the questions of standard and professional requirements. Currently there is no professional guidelines and a grossly misbehaving leader cannot be stricken off of the register and banned from practicing leadership in the future.

Is it realistic or even possible for leaders to fit within a professional identity? The structured professionalization attempts of management and leadership usually fail to focus upon fundamental, practical self-identity questions such as: "who am I", " why and how should I be as a leader". They also fail to contribute to the ongoing debate on how leaders are currently developed and how they could be better supported within a highly problematic pedagogical space the business schools. It is argued (Harding, et.al 2017) that leaders need a more phenomenological and practice-based view of organisations where the focus is on the development of character, of sense making and sense giving, on humility and wisdom as

conditions of leadership. Harding (2017) and colleagues argue that leadership is a meta-profession that exceeds the prescriptive nature of the professional identity and imposes a different kind of expectations upon the leader.

Leadership as a meta-profession

Leading is a process, always adapting to changing realities in which there is a constant co-development of the leader, followers and the organisation. In this perspective it is not the possession of knowledge, but the ability to share knowledge effectively that marks out the leader (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2011). This sharing requires a certain mindset and practical wisdom from the leader. Professional leadership consists of a mindset that brings together the leader's identity, personality and values with the organisational settings and challenges. Whether these personality dimensions are in place, or not, the leader as an individual enters into practice by putting the 'self' within a domain of experiences and actions.

A meta-profession is one that constantly and continuously reflects on existing practices, the external environment and the roles within the organisation. In this approach the leader does not resolve problems or change 'reality'. The leader understands the "logic of practice" or the field of dynamics and applies wisdom and humility in everyday practice. Meta-leadership acknowledges the interconnected and continuously changing nature of organisational and social realities. It draws from the best practices of a whole range of professions and distils their essence into unique individual practices of the individual leaders' own values, integrity, lived experiences and levels of practical wisdom. Harding et.al. (2017 p. 8.) argue that: *"Leaders are sense-making mechanisms, they provide meaning to complex situations, they enact, they translate ideas into practice and power into influence; in that respect they stand outside the norms of a profession yet their behaviours and decisions impact on all professions"*.

Leadership is a meta-profession as it provides both core and peripheral vision into other management practices and professions. At its best it embraces the professional principles of other disciplines, it highlights gaps and identifies issues within existing professional identities and frameworks and operates with wisdom as a periscope observing the efficiency and sufficiency of people working 'professionally' in modern corporations. More importantly leaders are the mechanisms for radical change and adaptation of the professional ethos itself by participating in changing norms and standards when needed with integrity, humility and moral power.

A meta-professional approach leads to the organisation of leadership through a process of ongoing self-development and critical reflection on one's daily activities, rather than a static checklist or a process of periodic assessment of meeting sets of specific criteria.

Leadership does not entail a number of formal requirements as much as the ability to embrace virtues, sense-making and strong cognitive adaptation as well as an inherent work ethic.

Ciulla (2011) calls for "good" leaders who are not only effective in the traditional sense of maximising value for shareholders, but who are also ethical and carefully consider the interests of all stakeholders and pay attention to the long-term impact of their decisions. In essence, "good" in Ciulla's sense means reliable, trustworthy, sound, safe and effective. The good leader is expected to be fully present in the workplace, to be embodied and in touch with their higher purpose, emotionally intelligent, authentic, listen deeply, be prepared to show their weaknesses and ask for the support of others. Those leaders who meet these high expectations work for the common good and create strong communities, and although there

are examples of embodied and morally sound leaders, there can be no doubt in the light of recent events that they are in the minority. Why is this so?

Goodness cannot be guaranteed by legislation, and human frailty cannot be spirited away by new regulations. Without appropriate leadership, moral education and a re-examination of the very purpose of business there can be no lasting change. It is not that legislation and rules are unnecessary, rather that there is a wider whole which recognises that there cannot be a set of rules for business which are at odds with those for life in general, that business cannot be seen as impersonal or amoral, and that we need to engage in discussion about what is of value. In that context, leadership, and particularly the personal example set by leaders, is an important and proven way of changing moral behaviour in the community, in the workplace and in politics (Illes, K. and Zsolnai, L. 2015).

Research in the fields of leadership studies, neurobiology, organisational and leadership development suggests that the socioeconomic, geopolitical and cultural-spiritual challenges of our time are interconnected (Guattari, F. 2000). To address them we need a fundamental change of perspective: “Not only do we have to change things, but we have to change the way we see things” (Brabandere, L. de. 2005, p. xi). Leaders, usually working under intense pressure exerted from within and without their organisations, have a key role to play in recognising individual and collective responsibilities and showing the way towards a more human and healthier way of life. Learning to see beyond the familiar requires a particular kind of deep personal and collective listening, and clarity about values, purpose and the intent to do good. The challenge is to achieve this in a fast-paced world. This is where leadership development has a role to play.

Leadership development

Leadership development and executive training/coaching/mentoring is a thriving business with thousands of large and small providers of varying quality. The field is well established although there are not many books focus on leadership development specifically. The Handbook of Leadership Development (McCauley et.al., 1998) suggests that challenge, assessment and support need to be designed into leader development. A more recent publication, The Field guide to Leadership Development (Kempster, et.al., 2017) puts the emphasis on reflection, dialogue, creativity, relationality and a practice orientation in leadership development initiatives and offers practical applications and methods for a more integrated development of leaders.

The search for integrated and practical approaches to leadership and organisational development to support the well-being of leaders and followers in the workplace comes from many fields including critical management studies (Sinclair, A. 2007; Ford, J. and Harding, N. 2007; Cunliffe, A. 2009; Alvesson, M. and Spicer, A. 2012), philosophy (Ladkin, D. 2010), business and virtue ethics (Zsolnai. L. 2014; Ciulla, J. 2011) and neuroscience (Hanson, R. 2009).

The discussion among academics is ongoing and some practitioners are also willing to experiment with more novel approaches to leadership development.

There is a lot to learn from the wisdom traditions and applying the well-established principles of the contemplative spiritual traditions.

It is the action rather than the intention that plays a central role in determining the ethical outcome (Ladkin, 2017) so leadership and personal development programmes need to focus on ethical habit formation. Values and ethics are imbedded in ones habits and perceptions.

The way one acts or relates to others, the way one makes decisions lead to outcomes that can be judged as ethical or unethical even if one's intentions are indeed to act ethically (Ladkin, 2015).

There are growing number of research papers offering theoretical underpinning and practical guidance on innovative leadership development initiatives. Unfortunately these initiatives rarely go beyond some academic communities. How to take up the innovative ideas and build them into the mainstream offering of Business Schools is a challenge for all of us who are passionate about bringing the best out of people and prepare graduates and executives not only for exams but for the growing challenges of life.

How could we help them to develop "the ability to live with uncertainty and not knowing and to do so without grasping after action, without irritability" (Keats, J. 1970, p.43).

Conclusion

The paper calls for an urgent review of organisations and how they take responsibility for the environment and the society they exist in.

An overview of the recent leadership literature reveals that the conversation has moved from the static framing of leadership to a collective, relational construct of leadership where the leader, followers the context and the purpose are continuously interacting and evolving. There are signs for the growth of value-rationality based inquiry and conversations about values and wisdom in organisations and in society at large. The world needs wise leaders and although the concept of wisdom has been with us since Plato, there is a shortage of wise leaders and one cannot expect a radical increase in wisdom until we genuinely start valuing wisdom over cleverness.

Wisdom requires lived experiences and the ability to reflect on and learn from one's experiences and apply them to the common good by making insightful and measured judgements and decisions.

Leadership as a practice offers wide-ranging methodologies for learning more about the complexities of the continuously emerging act of leading.

The paper also discussed some ideas about leadership as a profession and based on the work of Harding et.al. (2017) the leadership as a meta-profession framework was offered.

The final part of the paper reflected on the gap between the available research findings and practical tools and the modest uptake of these creative initiatives in leadership development programmes. By incorporating character building, development of ethical habits and discussing the concepts of leadership and practice and leadership as a meta-profession with students in business schools we could change the conversation from profit generation to value creation. These small and vital steps could begin to change mindsets and develop leaders who would imbed organisations in their environmental and social contexts and turn these entities into the "Commonwealth of Life" where human, nonhuman, and future life on Earth would equally flourish.

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