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COACHING FOR WISDOM

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Abstract: The late American Historian, Barbara Tuchman famously described history as a 'march of folly' led by 'wooden-headedness'. In the light of recent world events it must be concluded that nothing much has changed. Yet, now, with the fate of the planet potentially hanging in the balance, we need wise leaders. And coaching, if done well, can foster the development of wisdom in leaders who can be better enabled to deal with the paradoxes of our times and take their organisations into the future. New research in the areas of decision making and applied wisdom psychology provides useful frameworks and techniques for coaches wishing to grow their practice and help build wiser leaders.

Keywords: wisdom, coaching, decision-making

INTRODUCTION

Coaching for wisdom is a worthy topic of research, not least because bad decisions have an amplified effect on our mental health, our livelihoods, our communities, and the sustainability of the planet (Webb, 2008).

This paper follows an unpublished research project funded by the Australian NSW Department of Innovation and Technology and conducted through the University of Wollongong, 2011-2015. My colleague, Dr Barry Partridge and I developed a validated survey for measuring 'system 1' and 'system 2' thinking in decision-making. Moreover, we discovered a 'system 3' which was orthogonally distinct from system 1 and 2 and contributed more strongly to wisdom-related performance. Using the DPS (Decision Processing Survey) on a sample of over 250 respondents, we found a measurable bias in decisionmaking preference across the three systems that could account for wise decision-making (Partridge and Webb, 2013). Since then, I have been independently investigating the utility and measurement of 'system 3' thinking for helping coaches and mentors enhance wisdom-related thinking and decision-making in themselves and in the leaders they work with.

THE BASIS FOR WISE DECISION-MAKING

Count Axel Oxenstierna, Lord High Chancellor of Sweden (1612-1654) is credited with probably the most famous Swedish quotation in the Englishspeaking world: 'Do you not know, my son, with how little wisdom the world is governed?' (in a letter to his son Johan written in 1648). Similarly, the late American Historian, Barbara Wertheim Tuchman described the unfortunate trajectory of political decisions from Troy to the Vietnam War as characterised by 'wooded-headedness' – the tendency to assess a situation in terms of preconceived fixed notions while ignoring or rejecting any contrary signs (Tuchman, 1984). Given recent world events, nothing much seems to have changed.

In an era when discontinuity is the only constant, the ability to lead wisely has been all but forgotten. All the knowledge in the world did not prevent the collapse of the global financial system. 'What is curious', write management researchers David Rooney and Bernard McKenna, 'is that wisdom has been valued by humanity for thousands of years and in all cultures, but it is something that managers, business schools and management researchers rarely mention' (Rooney, McKenna, and Liesch, 2010).

'Business now demands a different kind of leader', say famed Japanese Management Professors, Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi (2011) in their breakthrough Harvard Business Review article, 'one who will make decisions knowing that the outcomes must be good for society as well as the company… they also need a third, often forgotten kind of knowledge, called phronesis, or practical wisdom.'

Daniel Kahneman, the 2002 Nobel Memorial Prize Winner in Economics wrote about system 1 and system 2 thinking in 'Thinking, Fast and Slow' (Kahneman, 2011). The idea that much of our thinking and decision-making is subconscious, and automatic (system 1), as opposed to rational and deliberate (system 2). But he missed the observation by Nonaka and Takeuchi that there is a third system.

We typically rely on system 1 thinking because it's automatic, fast, and experience-based. We use our innate or gut feel to quickly arrive at a decision that 'feels right'. System 2 thinking is logical, rational, and fact-based. We use system 2 when we need to slow down and analyse the information to deduce a solution.

The third system on the other hand is a more 'considerative' way of assessing information and arriving at a decision. We use system 3 when we need to think about how to balance the various interests in the short and long term, and when dealing with complex and poorly defined problems that have multiple, unknown solutions. For example, deciding on a particular career path, accepting the death of a loved one, or solving long-lasting conflicts among family members.

Meeks and Jeste (2009) allude to the operation of a third system through various neuro-correlates. Wisdom is a multidimensional and adaptive human attribute based in distinct regions in the brain. Within the prefrontal cortex, there are three regions that are important – dorsolateral, ventromedial and there's something that connects them – the anterior cingulate. The dorsolateral prefrontal cortex is like a proverbial father. This is the part of the cortex that tells us not to do things that are socially unacceptable or undesirable. The ventromedial prefrontal cortex, on the other hand, is like the proverbial mother – kind, compassionate. Usually the dorsolateral and ventromedial parts function efficiently and don't always need a mediator, but when necessary, the anterior cingulate can be the conflict detector and sometimes, resolver.

Wisdom is balance. It is balance between the proverbial father-like thinking and the proverbial mother-like thinking, and also between cognition and emotion, between the oldest and the newest parts of the brain (Meeks and Jeste, 2009).

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WISDOM

How wisdom contributes to decision-making has been attracting much research interest. Psychologists have described wisdom as 'the search for a moderate course between extremes, a dynamic between knowledge and doubt, a sufficient detachment from the problem at hand, and a well-balanced coordination of emotion, motivation, and thought' (Staudinger, 2008).

The Berlin Wisdom paradigm has served to operationalise wisdom as a scientifically grounded psychological construct (Baltes and Studinger, 2000). Wisdom is defined as 'good judgement and advice in difficult and uncertain matters of life'. The five criteria used for assessing individual wisdom-related performance are intended to reflect a balance between intellect and character:

1. Rich factual knowledge about human nature and the life course,
2. Rich procedural knowledge about ways of dealing with life problems,
3. Lifespan contextualism – an awareness and understanding of the many contexts of life, how they relate to each other, and how they change over the lifespan,
4. Value relativism and tolerance – an acknowledgement of individual, social, and cultural differences in values and life priorities, and
5. Knowledge about handling uncertainty, including the limits of one's own knowledge.

The elegant experimental design of the Berlin Wisdom paradigm has provided robust findings (Kunzmann and Baltes, 2005):

1. Wisdom is an ideal, rather than a state of being. Many adults are on the way toward wisdom, but very few people approach a high level of wisdom-related performance as measured.

2. The period of late adolescence and early adulthood is the primary age window for wisdom-related knowledge to emerge. Age may be necessary but it is not sufficient to guarantee wisdom.

3. Neither academic intelligence nor basic personality traits play a major role in the development of wisdom-related performance during adulthood.

4. The expression of wisdom-related performance can be enhanced by relatively simple social interventions. For example, having respondents discuss the problem with a trusted adviser, or asking respondents to engage in inner dialogue about the problem with a person of their choice, or even instructing respondents to 'make a wise choice' increased performance levels by almost one standard deviation.

These findings suggest that many adults have the latent potential for wisdomrelated performance when challenged on wisdom tasks. In this sense wisdom may represent a set of competencies, which can be aroused or triggered by circumstances, or indeed by asking the right questions.

The Center for Practical Wisdom at The University of Chicago has been promoting the scientific understanding of wisdom and its role in the decisions and choices that affect everyday life through the Defining Wisdom Project (2007-2011) and the Wisdom Research Project (2012-2015). Center Director, Howard Nusbaum defines wisdom as 'prudential judgement in the service of human flourishing'. The most important aspects of research at the Center have been to find the experiences and practices that enable people to increase their wisdom (Matelski-Boulware and Nusbaum, 2015):

1. Research shows how embodied practices such as Alexander Technique or Feldenkrais may change wisdom.

2. Insight practice is another area of research to explain how people are able to find wise solutions to problems that don't come from standard deductive processes.

3. Practicing empathy-based mindfulness meditation can in turn lead to positive, possibly wiser, outcomes in situations involving others.

4. The prospect of wiser corporations is another area of practice. For example, the creation of 'B Corps' certification, which urges companies to not only be the best in the world but also be the best for the world are redefining success by using the power of business to solve social and environmental problems.

5. It is also possible to think about wisdom in the professional domains, both for education and its application.

The Stein Institute for Research on Aging at The University of California San Diego has also been researching wisdom. Curiously, they discovered the 'Ageing Paradox', the finding that people in general report feeling happier as they age (Jeste and Oswald, 2014). Bangen, Meeks, and Jeste (2013) identified six components of wisdom from a comprehensive literature review:

1. Social Advising - This involves having a good general knowledge of life and how to apply it in solving social problems, often hard-won through personal life experience. This element also involves an understanding of the developmental course of human life and how to apply relative judgement to different stages of the life cycle.

2. Decisiveness - It is important to think about the pros and cons of everything before deciding. That needs to happen initially, but at some point, you do have to decide. You must be decisive and act upon it. This element is about recognising ambiguity but making quick and effective decisions. Not sitting on the fence too long.

3. Emotion Regulation - Regulating feelings and exercising self-control is essential to good judgement. Not 'flying off the handle' or withdrawing. Control over your emotions is not absence of emotions but having control over the magnitude and the variation in them. At the same time, emotion regulation is primarily associated with more positive emotions. Not an extreme, ecstatic kind of positivity, but more contentedness.

4. Insight - This is knowing yourself. It includes self-reflection and the ability to analyse and understand yourself and your actions. Striving to do that through self-reflecting and understanding one's strengths as well as one's weaknesses.

5. Pro-Social Behaviours - These are things we do for others rather than for ourselves. This element represents an understanding of how others are feeling, a capacity to imagine what it must be like for them, and a preference for altruism, and a sense of fairness.

6. Tolerance for Divergent Values - Acceptance of diversity of views means you may have strong feelings about something, but also understand why somebody else might have different feelings about it. It doesn't mean that you give up on your values, but you can also understand why someone else may feel or think differently. It also means not being 100% certain that what you think is right, which means you'll be more prepared to change your mind if new information presents itself.

MEASURING WISE DECISION-MAKING

The Institute have recently developed a psychometrically robust selfassessment of these six components, the San Diego Wisdom Scale (SD-WISE) (Thomas, et. Al., 2017). Taken together, they represent the best approximation of system 3 decision-making. In other words, an individual scoring highly across all

components might be expected to do well in wisdom-related performance tasks such as those used in the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm.

Coincidentally, researchers from the original Berlin Wisdom group have come up with their own self-assessment of wisdom, the Brief Wisdom Screening Scale (BWSS) (Glück, et. Al, 2013) which was a validation of four scales from the literature, plus the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm. While there was some overlap with the more recent SD-WISE scale, these additional wisdom elements add greater depth to system 3 decision-making:

1. Self-Transcendence - This element represents the innate desire to discover meaning in human life. It is associated with experiencing a decreased reliance on social definitions of self, a greater sense of connectedness with past and future generations and considering oneself an integral part of the universe (Le and Levenson, 2005; Levenson, et. al, 2014).

2. Mindfulness - The skill of bringing your attention to whatever is happening in the present moment. It is sustained, focused attention on meaningful tasks and activities. This element is necessary to balance mental activity with mental control. Paradoxically, finding mental stillness can enhance productivity and creativity (Williams, 2013; Webb and Lee-Bates, 2015).

3. Compassion - Is when you go out of your way to help the physical, mental, or emotional pain of another and of yourself. It is recognising others' distress and having a desire to alleviate it, although it is also associated with fairness, justice, and interdependence. Cultivating compassion through training contributes to greater altruistic behaviour and the development of neural systems implicated in understanding the suffering of others (Weng, et. al, 2013). And compassion can be measured (Pommier, 2011).

My proposed self-assessment scale of system 3 decision making, the Decision Preferences Questionnaire (DPQ), includes some validated items from the SDWISE, the BWSS, and additional items from my own research and practice. Four items from each of the 9 elements of wisdom (above), randomised, with positive and negative directions, forms a scale of 36 items. Data collection and analysis is expected to yield a valid scale by early 2019. The DPQ will be expected to help coaches, mentors, and their clients better understand their use of system 3 thinking and how to enhace their capacity for wise decisionmaking.

Having a low preference for some elements and a high preference for others, means an individual's capability to make wise decisions may be biased. Having high enough preferences for all 9 elements of system 3 increases the likelihood of thinking and acting wisely. Because these are preferences, then they can be

developed. And coaching and mentoring can be directed to enhancing the particular elements of system 3.

A PRACTICAL MODEL FOR COACHING FOR WISDOM

The Wisdom and Culture Lab at The University of Ontario, Canada has been pivotal in establishing a practical framework for wise thinking that lends itself to coaching and mentoring. According to Grossmann and colleagues, 'wise thinking is a skill. It is not simply an attribute of a person but rather a property of person-in-context. The potential for wise thinking emerges in the interaction of the person and their environment' (Grossmann, et. al., 2013).

Grossmann and colleagues have established that wise reasoning mediates the effects of age on wellbeing. In other words, just thinking wisely improves life (Grossmann, et. al., 2013). Wisdom needs to be considered in the context of everyday life according to Grossmann and Gerlach (2016). The central characteristics of wisdom have a dynamic component. Just because you are wise in one context does not mean you will be wise in another. Understanding the situational contingencies where wise thinking may lead to wise actions is vital to promoting wisdom.

Foe example, one way to buffer thinking against bias in cases where selfinterests are unavoidable is 'ego-decentering'. In other words, viewing events from a 'fly on the wall' vantage point (Grossmann, 2017).

In situation-specific experimental conditions, Grossmann and colleagues have been able to demonstrate that wise reasoning varies across cultures (e.g., younger and middle-aged Japanese showed greater ability to reason wisely than their U.S. American counterparts), women are somewhat better at wise reasoning than men, and wise reasoning dips in middle-age (35-50) and then rises (Brienza, et. al., 2017).

Grossmann (2017a) has formulated a model of wise reasoning and a constructivist perspective on teaching wisdom. His framework of wise thinking in everyday life includes (a) intellectual humility or recognition of the limits of one's own knowledge, (b) appreciation of perspectives broader than the issue at hand, (c) sensitivity to the possibility of change in social relations, and (d) compromise or integration of different opinions.

Modifying the descriptors slightly leads to a WISE model for thinking wisely: **W**eigh up uncertainty and change; practice **I**ntellectual humility; **S**earch for integration and compromise; **E**ngage others' perspectives (see Figure 1).

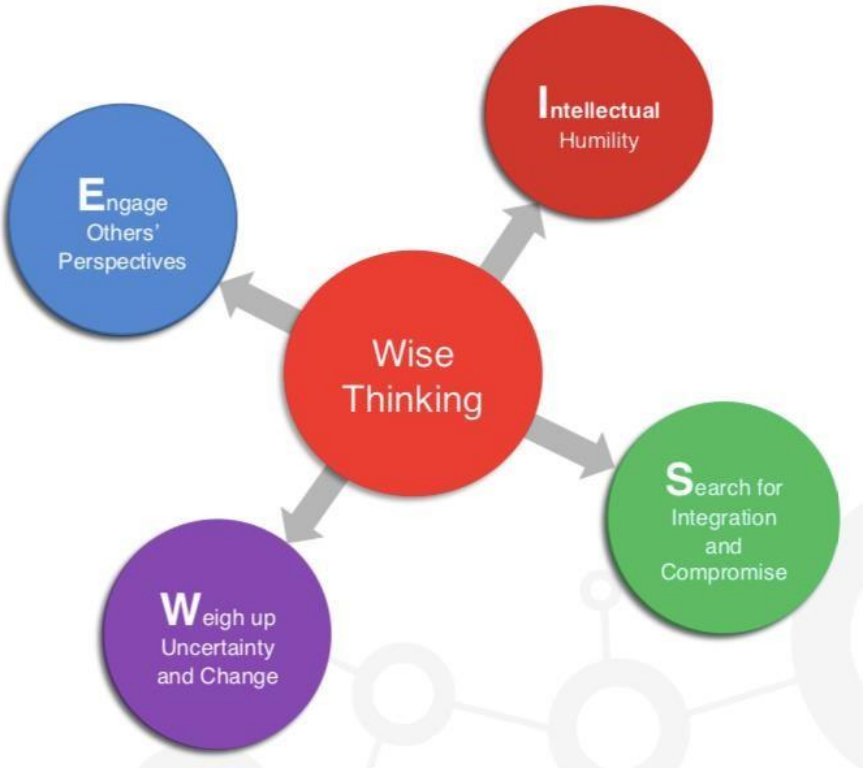

Figure 1. A model for WISE thinking (From Grossmann, 2017a)

From the model of wise thinking, Grossmann and colleagues designed the Situated WIse reasoning Scale (SWIS) to assess responses to experimental situations (Brienza, et. al., 2017). For example, under **W**eigh up uncertainty and change: 'I looked for different solutions as the situation evolved'; under **I**ntellectual humility: 'I looked for any extraordinary circumstances before forming my opinion'; under **S**earch for integration and compromise: 'I tried my best to find ways to accommodate both of us; under **E**ngage others' perspectives: 'I tried to see the conflict from the point of view of an uninvolved person'.

I have modified some of the questions here to make it easier for their use in coaching and mentoring (see Figure 2). The purpose of these questions is to provoke wise thinking in relation to the particular issue or decision confronting the leader who is being coached or mentored. Used in this way, it might be expected to improve the likelihood that the leader will make wiser decisions across a broader range of problems.

W	Weigh up Uncertainty and Change	• What different solutions might there be? • What different outcomes could there be? • Could your opinion on the situation be incorrect?
I	Intellectual Humility	• Could the other person's opinions be correct? • What extraordinary circumstances might there be before you form your opinion? • Can you accept that there may be information to which you do not have access?
S	Search for Integration and Compromise	• Can you anticipate how potential conflict might be resolved? • What would you think if you were someone else watching this situation? • What might other people think or feel if they were watching this situation? • Would an outside person have a different opinion from yours about the situation?
E	Engage Others' Perspectives	• What do you notice when you put yourself in the other person's shoes? • What might be that person's perspective?

Figure 2. Coaching for wisdom questions (From Birenza, et. al., 2017)

CONCLUSIONS

As Sternberg (1998) pointed out in his balance theory of wisdom, 'information processing in and of itself is not wise or unwise. Its degree of wisdom depends on the fit of a wise solution to its context'. Likewise, coaching for wisdom is not solely concerned with enhancing system 1 and system 2 information processing to make better decisions. Wise reasoning has been found to be malleable across people and contexts in everyday life. Everyone possesses wisdom resources to a greater or lesser degree. The coach or mentor can deliberately stimulate these resources to help the leader use system 3 processing to make wise decisions. In time, this may give rise to the characteristics of wisdom in leadership.

Coaching and mentoring has moved beyond mere skills practice or cognitive behaviour change. The ultimate benefit of coaching and mentoring is to stimulate mental agility and effect individual positive growth and transformation. Deliberately coaching to achieve wisdom must be considered the highest aim for the leader, and for the coach or mentor. The future of the planet may well depend on it.

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