

Leader
to
Leader

Cultivating Wisdom

By Jennifer Garvey Berger

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“The trouble with jogging is that, by the time you realize you're not in shape for it, it's too far to walk back.” (Franklin Jones)

I think the world needs to change. You probably think that too. Leaders—at least the good ones—tend to become leaders in order to make a difference, to lead a vision, to support people, to create a better future. And yet even with intelligent, thoughtful, diligent leaders, there still seems to be something of a leadership crisis—and it's hard to know what to do about it.

You know this story by heart: the world is more complex, filled with uncertainty and ambiguity, and changing more rapidly than ever. Over generations, we have gotten used to thinking of the future as sort of the same as today, but that idea of a future like the past has mostly been turned on its head.

Organizations have become places of constant change. Once major change efforts happened every five or so years. Now they spring up before the dust has settled on the last change initiative and with no expectation this change will be finished before the next roll of change begins. This constant change is unsettling and confusing, and it sets a more difficult task for the leaders we expect to guide us safely towards the unknown future.

It is as though the human race, as Franklin Jones points out above, has jogged out into this modern world—where we have created tools far more powerful than we are. Now we are panting as we look around, realizing that we can't go back, and we are just barely strong enough to go forward. What has brought us humans here will not bring us safely to the next place.

Leaders are making decisions that could shape the future in almost unimagined ways. Technological and sociological changes mean that we have to reach beyond our normal sensemaking capabilities. Like the coral reefs that are in danger of extinction because of the changing temperature of the seas around them, the changing context of human interactions leaves us struggling to evolve fast enough to survive the demands.

We can evolve weapons and financial systems and computer programs over time, each one built upon the decades of work that have come before. But we cannot evolve wise humans in quite that way, because, as Harvard theorist Robert Kegan reminds us, it is not the case that highly evolved people meet, mate, and produce highly evolved infants. Each of us has only a single lifetime to move from our infancy through to wisdom. Many (most?) of us don't make it.

We have to learn how to evolve to wisdom in a single lifetime, and we have to do that learning quickly. And perhaps the demand is highest on leaders who are guiding people and organizations through to a new tomorrow. What might that evolution look like though, and how could we find our way there quickly? I don't have all the answers to that pivotal set of questions, but I have a beginning.

Making a map: Adult development and the path to a new self

We humans have had the concept of "wisdom" for thousands of years, and long ago began to connect the idea of wisdom with age. It was only in the last

50 years, though, that theorists and researchers have become increasingly interested in the ways adults grow and change over time. This field helps us make sense of what it means to be wise and why so many people don't seem to make it.

Robert Kegan, Bill Torbert, Susanne Cook-Greuter and other theorists have been getting ever more precise in their descriptions of what adult growth might look like. They differ in some of the particulars, but the main gist of each of these theories goes like this:

At first, the minds and emotions of others are mysterious to us. As you imagine (or remember) the self-centered teenager, thinking the world exists to bring her pleasure (or pain), you might get a sense of someone who was egocentric. Developmental theories point out that those who see the world through this form of mind appear egocentric because they cannot yet hold the perspectives of others. She has not yet developed this critical capacity.

As a person matures, he begins to take on the perspectives of others, eventually welcoming a kind of internal Board of Directors into his conscience in order to help him make decisions and know the best way to be. With this more "Socialized" form of mind, he looks to others (e.g., people, ideas, cultures, etc.) to understand the great complexity of the world and figure out what to do; he follows the norms of whatever group or idea (or organization or theory) he has selected to be on his internal Board. This form of mind is familiar to us when we think of people who seem to always be looking outside themselves for the views or guidance of others, measuring themselves against an external yardstick. It's probably the case that this form of mind was completely sufficient for most of human history. People were expected to be socialized into a family or village or tribe or country. They were supposed to take their guidance from those who led them. Even the leaders often had clear guides (in what was religiously or socially acceptable)

and thus didn't need to have their own ideas about what was best. For nearly everyone, it wasn't necessary (or helpful, often) to be able to come up with their own judgments or vision about how things should be.

Today, though, it's clear that leaders need to do just that. To cut through the complexity of all the competing voices, perspectives and ideas about the world, most real leaders find they cannot find a strong enough internal Board of Directors to advise them. In addition to listening hard to the voices of others, real leaders also need to find that "Self-authored" voice for themselves—and if they have not yet found it, they may well find themselves knocked about by unfriendly tides. Modern leaders need to be the Chair of their internal Board of Directors, listening to important guiding others, but ultimately running the decisions and visions through their own internal guiding system. This form of mind, which was probably not particularly helpful even 100 years ago, is now expected in leaders all over the globe.

Even more daunting, there are calls that suggest leaders of the future will need to put down their hard-won self-authored views and take more holistic and interconnected views. The constant whirl of change and the fog of the ambiguous future may well call on an even more complex form of mind. The "self-transforming" form of mind is the most sophisticated yet studied. These leaders can use the tension of very different stakeholders to create innovation rather than discord. They see the biggest picture and reach far into the future in their vision. They hold the often-conflicting requirements of health of the individuals, the organization, the community, and the planet simultaneously. If these are the leaders we need, we'd better get busy cultivating them, because we certainly don't have a bumper crop. We can't expect wisdom to sprout up like a weed in unfertile soil. We have mostly been competing for these wise leaders, and wringing our hands when we can't lure them into our organization.. This is a losing strategy—for organizations and societies. If we are to have the leaders we all require, we'll need a new approach.

The bad news is that this won't be easy. Growing the forms of mind of those in our workplaces—not just the content of their minds—is a new endeavor and requires some change in perspective and approach. The good news is that just as we know quite a lot about what the path of adult growth looks like, we're also learning quite a lot about how to encourage this growth.

Walking the path: Intentionally cultivating growth

Learning about the path we might walk isn't the same as learning about what we *will* walk or *must* walk. Just as you've known particularly wise 30 year olds and particularly immature 60 year olds, your own development path is a possibility that life might offer to you—and that you might choose to take. My colleague Keith Johnston and I have been working and leading and researching for decades, and we've found three habits of mind that leaders can weave through their work in order to support themselves and others to grow. These habits, if you practice them over time and build them into your daily work, will help you keep walking the developmental path and reaching towards wisdom.

The first habit of mind is *asking different questions*. What many people do not understand is that the questions we automatically ask—the questions that our brain forms without much effort from us—are questions that keep us on the same path, questions whose answers are unlikely to surprise us. I have found in my practice what neuroscientists find in the brain: when we are the most surprised, we are the least likely to ask good questions. Rather, when we're unsure we tend to ask questions that will move us back into familiar ground. When the time is most ripe for our learning, our reflexes push us away from learning and into something that feels more comfortable. Having the courage, and the ability to ask different questions, and being open to a wider range of possibilities is key to equipping us to manage complex issues.

Better still, these different questions can open up the possibility of new paradigms where we can be at our most creative and innovative. To be able to ask *different* questions, questions that will keep us learning, is a habit of mind that stretches the brain, makes possible new discoveries and new connections, and creates a distinctive learning system.

The second habit is *taking multiple perspectives*. It turns out that holding a variety of opposing perspectives—at the same time—is both a key to development and also a key to creating innovative organizations. Leaders in the future will need to be able to see and understand sharply competing stakeholders and then find ways to synthesize across the difference to come up with new and more inclusive solutions. Leaders have to take some perspectives already—it's very hard to become a leader if you're locked inside your single way of thinking about things. What we've found, though, is that leaders often take the perspectives that are easiest for them (those people who are quite like you). The perspectives we most need to take are those that bewilder or anger us—or the ones we don't notice at all. Holding those perspectives as vital keys to a full understanding (rather than believing that some people were put on this planet to annoy us!) increases our understanding and our compassion. And, as an additional benefit, as leaders practice holding multiple perspectives, they grow.

The third habit of mind is *seeing systems*. Seeing systems isn't always the same as systems thinking. It's about noticing patterns and interconnections—both the ones around you (throughout the organization) and the ones inside you (the patterns of your own thinking and behavior). It's also about understanding some of the non-intuitive principles of complex adaptive systems: that they are non-linear, that the way you draw the boundaries shapes what you see, that they can tip over into totally new states even after relatively small changes (and they can stay exactly the same even after great effort is put into making them different). It turns out that people who are

farther along in their developmental journey have easier access to seeing—and thus being able to shape—the patterns around them. This ability is profoundly strategic: if you cannot see the patterns in the system, it's much harder to find a leverage point to make a desired change.

Creating the path for you and others: Leading development

If you, as a leader, can practice these habits of mind—even a little each day—you'll keep growing. Rather than having to try to remember to practice them, though, I urge leaders to think about the ways to weave these habits through the fabric of an organization.

For example, why is it that meetings have a standard flow of items (covering off old business, heading to new business, etc.) but they do not have a standard way of *being* together? What if all meetings were to consider that some agenda items could benefit from our thinking—and we could also benefit from thinking about them? This would lead us to have as action points:

1. Questioning time: List all the questions the group has about a particular issue and rather than answering them, first ask: what questions *aren't* we asking?
2. Perspective-taking time: Consider the perspectives or voices that are strongest in setting your approach. Whose perspectives would strongly disagree? Whose voices aren't taken into account at all? What could we learn from taking those perspectives into consideration?
3. Systems synthesis time: How can we synthesize across our different views—not to defend them but to name them and then stand above them all looking at the higher order issues?

I am not suggesting all meetings need to do all three things, nor that this is necessarily a linear process, but imagine the difference between a meeting segmented in this way rather than a meeting segmented in a more commonplace way. In meetings like this, people could build entirely new

ideas together, solve problems they had not solved before, and—at the same time—people would grow.

Setting Up Scaffolds

Similarly, imagine building into your procedures a conversation among key stakeholders that took place *before* the job description was even written. You could ask yourself, What sort of form of mind are we hoping this person will have, and, if we find a candidate whose form of mind is not as good a fit as we'd like (but who is perfect in other ways), what supports could we build in to the role to help the new employee to be more successful? Note that while you might think these supports are most necessary when the new employee's form of mind lags behind the demands of the role, I've found that these supports are just as necessary when an employee has a form of mind that is farther along than the role requires.

For example, imagine that Company X had listed a complex blend of sophisticated form of mind and also rare technical skills for the leader of this new division. As in most cases, their dream candidate did not apply and they had to pick a real human—with strengths and weaknesses—instead. The candidate they selected, Ron, was hired for his technical expertise but lacked some of the sophisticated sense-making the hiring committee thought would be ideal. Recognizing that perhaps he wasn't as self-authored as the senior role might demand, they set up scaffolds to help him grow into the position. The new role came with a developmentally-oriented coach as well as some time on a leadership program specifically intended to expand a leader's relationship with his own voice. These two supports helped Ron to develop his form of mind while still using his technical knowledge in increasingly sophisticated ways.

Sometimes the reverse is the case. Company Y, operating during these tight financial times, was delighted to find Maria, who really was a dream candidate with sophisticated technical and sense-making skills.

Unfortunately, the hiring committee knew that Maria was hired into a role reporting to a boss who clearly didn't have the complex form of mind Maria herself had. The savvy hiring committee, aware of the ways they might be setting Maria up for frustration (yet so needing her special blend of skills and perspective), re-crafted the job description in a more independent and complex way than it had been, and also supported Maria to set up a colleague group inside the organization to support her growth and development. In this way, Maria was supported to be in a role that might otherwise be constraining in unhelpful ways. Because the focus on her form of mind had set her up to succeed, Maria was able to bring her biggest self to work—and inspire others around her to similarly bring their biggest selves.

Conclusion: Everything We Can Become

These are just two possible ways to weave using habits of mind and ideas about adult development into the basic fabric of work. There are dozens—or even hundreds—of other ways we could intentionally weave these ideas through our organizations. With a focus on the need for supporting the development of wisdom as well as the development of skills, we can create organizations that help people be more effective with their current way of seeing the world and also to grow to a more complex way over time. Together, we can begin to intentionally cultivate wisdom in leaders throughout our organizations, communities, and governments. We humans are extraordinary beings, and we have shaped the world so that it makes demands upon us that will push us—and our fellow companions on this fragile planet—to the edges of our capacities. We now need to use everything we know and everything we can become to increase the wise leadership our world requires.

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