



Why Wisdom Can't Be Taught



By [Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries](#), INSEAD Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change

In the pursuit of wisdom, executives may find themselves taking off their masks to become truly authentic and reflective leaders.

"I cannot teach anyone anything, I can only make them think." - Socrates

The day after becoming the CEO of a company facing turbulent times, David had a dream. In it, while walking on a beach he discovered a bottle. On opening, a genie appeared offering him a wish in exchange for her freedom. Eschewing riches, fame or a long life, David opted for the one thing he knew he needed to help him guide his people in the best way possible. He chose the gift of wisdom.

In today's hyperactive digital age, attaining wisdom is a challenge. With tablets and phones and their various apps constantly vying for our immediate attention, it is increasingly difficult to find the time and mental space for making meaningful connections or engaging in the deep

conversations, reflection, emotional awareness, empathy and compassion, necessary in its pursuit.

Indeed, it is an unfortunate fact for many leaders in David's position, that while wisdom requires education, education does not necessarily make people wise. As Professor Charles Gragg noted in his classic case study "[Because Wisdom Can't Be Told](#)", the mere act of listening to wise statements and sound advice doesn't necessarily ensure the transfer of wisdom.

What does it mean to be wise?

People often equate wisdom with intelligence or being knowledgeable; but all too often, it becomes apparent that being intelligent and being wise are quite different things. The world is full of brilliant people who intellectualise without really understanding the essence of things. In contrast, wise people try to grasp the deeper meaning of what is known and strive to better understand the limits of their knowledge.

Wisdom implies more than merely being able to process information in a logical way. Knowledge becomes wisdom when we have the ability to assimilate and apply this knowledge to make the right decisions. As the saying goes, 'knowledge speaks but wisdom listens'. Wise people are blessed with good judgement. In addition, they possess the qualities of sincerity and authenticity, the former implying a willingness to say what you mean, the latter to be what you are.

Wise people are also humble; their humility deriving from a willingness to recognise the limitations of their knowledge. They accept that there are things they will never know. By accepting their ignorance, they are better prepared to bear their own fallibility. People who are wise know when what they are doing makes sense, but also when it will not be good enough. Ironically, it is exactly this kind of self-knowledge that pushes them to do something about it.

Wisdom can be looked at from both a cognitive and emotional perspective. Cognitively, wise people have the ability to see the big picture. They are able to put things in perspective; to rise above their personal viewpoint and observe a situation from many different angles (thus avoiding simplistic [black-and-white thinking](#)). From an emotional perspective, people acknowledged for their wisdom are reflective, introspective and tolerant of

ambiguity. They know how to manage negative emotions, and possess both empathy and compassion; qualities that differentiate them in an interpersonal context.

Ironically, what makes wisdom more important than success and riches is that it enables us to live well. Our mental and physical health flourishes when we are congruent with our beliefs and values. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, “Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony.” Wise people are attuned to what constitutes a meaningful life. They know how to plan for and manage such a life. This implies self-concordance, behaving consistently with their values, a journey that requires self-exploration, self-knowledge and self-responsibility.

Age doesn't make us wiser

So, how can we acquire wisdom and can we expedite its acquisition? Becoming wise is a very personal quest. It is only through our own experiences, learning how to cope with the major tragedies and dilemmas embedded within life's journey, that we will discover our own capacities and learn how to create wisdom.

Setbacks are memorable growth experiences contributing to a deeper understanding of the vicissitudes of life. Overcoming difficult situations contributes to an increased appreciation of life and the recognition of new possibilities. These experiences enable us to rise above our own perspectives and see things as they are.

Unfortunately, wisdom is not something that automatically comes with the passing of years. While older people may be more capable than their younger counterparts, many never put their life experiences to good use. To acquire the required sense of reflectivity may necessitate the help of others. Educators, coaches, psychotherapists and mentors can play a significant role, not only by assisting with the dissemination of knowledge but by helping those searching for wisdom work through challenging experiences and encouraging them to work on emotional awareness, emotional self-regulation, relational skills and mindfulness.

A number of specific steps can be taken to expedite the road to wisdom. In my work with executives I have found that creating a learning community in which participants have the opportunity to tell their stories, not only has a cathartic effect but also helps wisdom come to bear. While written case

studies can be helpful, life case studies narrated by participants have a much more dramatic, emotional impact. Telling and listening to personal stories is a starting point for a deeper understanding of oneself and others, and helps participants learn to hear what's not being said.

Wisdom and authenticity

A learning community is also a great place to practice open-mindedness. Encouraging participants to step out of their comfort zone and to deal with people who are very different from themselves, leads to a deeper understanding and acceptance of the ambiguous nature of things. If designed in a holistic manner, these communities are a great exercise in humility, giving participants a better awareness of their limitations as well as a greater ability to integrate their knowledge and experiences when dealing with the challenges ahead.

In their pursuit of wisdom, group members will be encouraged to learn from their mistakes, to think before acting and, by taking off their masks, to become more authentic in living their values.

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