
The Three Principles of Wise Power



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If you know how to harness the power of your mind, heart and soul, you will be wiser in the face of surprises and disruption.

One of today's damaging and common leadership misconceptions is the confusion of power with external control. All too often, we think of power as the ability to direct or influence the behaviour of others, or to force the course of events to conform to a predetermined scheme.

But there is an equally necessary kind of power, which is exerted inwardly. It turns out that power is as much about the ability to adapt to the world around us as it is about shaping the world. As the global business landscape becomes increasingly complex, our ability to develop our presence and gravitas has become an indispensable companion of authority.

A harmonious balance of inward- and outward-directed power is what I call *wise power*. It is the embrace of dualities that helps us meet the world halfway: in between what we want and what is offered to us. Beyond the illusion of full control, wise power is an art of surprise.

So what is wise power? Fundamentally, it is the ability to master the deeper dynamics – not just the surface phenomena – affecting the world, an organisation, a team, an individual, a conscience. Leaders developing their wise power train their attention towards the underlying forces shaping their environment and themselves. They are not as easily blindsided by threats or challenges. As their thinking is not beholden to entrenched prejudices and patterns of behaviour, they can devise more effective and more meaningful solutions.

The first step towards cultivating wise power is to loosen our mental and emotional grip on the tools that enabled our success thus far: our knowledge, experience, skills, philosophy, etc. These dependable tools can still be retained – actually, they are part of us and could not be discarded anyway – but we must be prepared at any time to stow them and grab hold of the new. Especially for high-achieving leaders accustomed to emphasising the will, wise power requires letting go.

Three principles

Three principles in particular are key to developing the self-mastery that nurtures wise power.

First, a *duality of mind* that comprehends multiple sides of an issue, rather than being restricted to the side that conforms to our pre-existing vision of things. With wisdom of the mind we can go even further, overcoming the mind's natural tendency to create inflexible oppositions. We learn to see a world large enough to hold contradictions in tension without forcing resolution – i.e. a both/and instead of either/or mentality. By being conscious of the way we look at things, we also develop our ability to choose how to look at things.

Second, an *emotional maturity* that allows us to cope with distasteful things just as well as we naturally warm to other things. The world, after all, contains plenty on both sides. The tendency to shrink from things we dislike diminishes our sense of reality and, by extension, our cognitive agility. Emotional maturity develops our ability to know both our likes and dislikes and to recognise them as feelings that we project onto the world, not innate properties of things. We needn't abandon, nor even resist our natural judgements of goodness and badness. Instead, we need to be fully aware of them so that we can create some distance. Because we can feel without being controlled by our feelings, we learn to influence our emotions while we

are influenced by them.

Third, a *generosity of soul* that feeds on dreams to inspire and motivate real action. When we are well connected with our fundamental dreams and aspirations, we are more susceptible to shift an unexpected turn of events into an opportunity. Instead of reacting to all the things that can make us fail to reach our goals, we learn when and how we must change our goals to succeed in life. Loosening our grip on transitory goals reduces fear of failure and discomfort with the unknown. Instead of being prisoners of our goals, we dream beyond them and learn to master the art of surprise that life can be.

The principles in practice

Let's take a practical example. How could we apply the principles of wise power to a business problem involving, say, technological innovation? First, the cognitive agility that comes with duality of mind allows us to better understand why innovation could be both a blessing and a curse. Indeed, innovation is a major source of competitive advantage for business, yet it can also pose a risk for the environment or for society, locking us into technological choices that are in fact detrimental over the long term.

Moreover, new technologies can often be frightening, as they carry the threat of our own obsolescence. Emotional maturity helps us recognise that the fear of technology has good sides, e.g. sensitivity to early warning signals, consistency of identity, healthy scepticism toward fads, etc. By accepting these emotions, we can avoid becoming the prisoners of innovation. Facing our fears thus feeds the process of cultivating wise prudence.

So what is the purpose of technology? What is the dream beyond innovation? These questions are of crucial importance. As leaders, our ability to answer them with a vision is a powerful asset for organisations. It creates motivation and develops passion for the future. It attracts and retains talent. The power of a dream helps us find a genuine purpose and a meaning in technology. It guides our technological innovation towards a better world rather than making innovation an end in itself.

A wiser approach to crisis management

Wise power also helps in managing potential ethical crises. In the face of a serious accusation of organisational wrongdoing (e.g. corruption or illicit

business practice), the first principle – duality of mind – compels curiosity. Rather than immediately dismissing the accusation as inconsistent with what we know of the organisation, we need to seek out all available information. Instead of resorting to reflexive denial, wise leaders may ask the company’s accuser, “Oh, if you know something that I don’t, tell me everything. I may not be fully aware.”

The second principle – emotional maturity – encourages compassion. Instead of reacting in outrage, we might say to the accuser, “What you tell me makes me feel very bad. I want to do something about it.” Acknowledging and making space for the emotion not only establishes common ground, but it also builds credibility. This breaks the feedback loop of violence (verbal or otherwise) that can make a bad situation even worse.

The third principle – generosity of soul – points the way forward. As wiser leaders, we train ourselves to give substance to responses such as, “What we ultimately want is for the company to be useful to society.” If the accusation proves to be true, action can be taken to bring the organisation’s culture and conduct back in line with its original ideal. The crisis can become an opportunity to return the purpose of the business to its rightful place at the very core of organisational activity. The organisation is likely to emerge from the firestorm both stronger than before and with a renewed sense of purpose.

With wise power, we care for end results while learning to forge our own path, aligned with what is most important to us and with a vision and purpose beyond the immediate goal.

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