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**Dynamics of Organisational Wisdom**

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# Dynamics of Organisational Wisdom

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper introduces the notion of organisational wisdom. While wisdom has been largely neglected in the management literature, there appears to be an increasing interest in wisdom and its practical application across a wide range of disciplines. A small, but growing number of writings drawing on the ancient wisdom traditions such as Zen Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, and discussions of spirituality and soul in the workplace indicate that the hard edge of management is softening to holistic and philosophical considerations. Facets of wise thought and action are central to burgeoning disciplines such as business ethics, sustainability, transformational leadership, corporate citizenship and social responsibility, and workplace democratisation. Built on the principles and practices of organisational learning and knowledge management, but surpassing them in their ability to foster learning, understanding, commitment, and “doing the right thing,” organisational wisdom provides an aim worth striving for. This paper identifies and explains important elements of organisational wisdom, and describes their interaction as a dynamic, complex system. Understanding this system illuminates causes of organisational learning problems, permits targeting key sticking points and levers for change, and suggests strategies for more effective learning and the achievement of important performance outcomes.*

**Key Words:** *Organizational wisdom, organisational learning, Zen Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, transformational leadership.*

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## A NEW ERA UNFOLDS

If the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> may be termed the *era of the learning organisation*, the period that supercedes it might aptly be termed the *era of organisational wisdom*; that is, if we can understand and overcome the barriers holding us back. Despite the explosion of research and writing on organisational learning, knowledge management, and related subjects since 1990, there continues

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to be concerned as to how to become a learning organisation, exploit intellectual capital, and get the most out of our human resources. Wisdom holds promise for future organisations that the quality movement, organisational learning and knowledge management, self-directed teams, and other initiatives such as Balanced Scorecard and, more recently, the “multiple bottom line, all attempted, but failed to deliver. These initiatives have contributed to profound advancements in organisational operation and performance, but they have neither individually nor collectively led to transformation. Seldom have they been integrated and leveraged such that the organisation develops foresight, continually learns and adapts, delivers products and services that exceed customer expectations, knows and does what’s right, and provides meaningful and fulfilling work to its employees. Such an organisation is enlightened, transcending *business as usual*. Such an organisation is wise. In the dynamic and complex world of today, fundamental transformation is not an option, but a necessity. This paper argues that the organisational and institutional transformation needed is to wisdom, and that attaining wisdom is possible.

## FROM LEARNING TO WISDOM

It is not the intent of this paper to exhaustively review the organisational learning / learning organisation literature, but, drawing on that and other bodies of literature, to provide a working foundation upon which the ideas of organisational wisdom can be developed. A sample of those sources drawn on more heavily includes Argyris (1982; 1991), Argyris and Schön (1978), Garvin (1993), Gorelick, Milton, and April (2004), Griffey (1998), Kim (1994), Lichtenstein (2000), Reynolds and Ablett (1998), Schein (1993; 1999), Senge (1990a; 1990b), Shaw and Perkins (1992), Shelton and Darling (2003), Tucker, Edmondson, and Spear (2002), Ulrich, Von Glinow, and Jick (1993).

These sources indicate that we have certainly achieved a profound increase in awareness about the need for change and adaptation, and the mechanism viewed as the best solution, learning organisations; but, paradoxically, we have fallen woefully short of becoming them. The components of organisational learning do not tell the story. It is the way they are arranged, fueled, and operate synergistically that explains how organisations learn (or fail to) and what they need to do to achieve greater levels of wisdom and effectiveness.

At the core of the system [model] are a couple of simple elements whose dynamic relationships animate and at least partially explain organisational learning and, potentially, wisdom. Effectively contending with context, learning, reflection, and biases, beliefs and assumptions assures organisational learning occurs; it is their interaction that enables organisational learning and converts it to wise thoughts and actions. Without reflection *in context*, for example, learning is minimised and effectiveness of strategies cannot truly be assessed.

Organisational wisdom transcends organisational learning in its commitment to doing the right thing over doing things right. Doing the right thing continually while contending with immediate crises—and sometimes in opposition to business logic—requires courage, commitment to core values that include *the greater good*, understanding of the big picture, and a willingness to trade short-term profit or ease with long-term viability. This implies an identification with something bigger than self, and may provide a source of meaning only possible when one’s self interests have been transcended. It may also mean thinking and acting in unconventional ways, which may open one up to criticism or other attack. The wise individual wears this vulnerability well.

Wisdom is greater than knowledge, intelligence, and experience, three attributes

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popularly held to comprise wisdom. Our organisations have these already. It is how they are linked and leveraged that makes the difference. The model of organisational wisdom put forward here attempts to show some of the important linkages amongst these and other elements and how they work together synergistically to promote or inhibit learning and wisdom. Can we not become wise in our thinking and action, we will continue to know about and aspire to become a learning organisation, but we will ultimately fail to achieve that which we set out to do: to anticipate and preempt problems and capitalise on potential opportunities; mobilise and engage organisational members; evolve from a reactionary organism to a proactive one; and remain viable and sustainable while serving as stewards to our communities and the environment.

### ANCIENT WISDOM FOR MODERN TIMES

Conscious being and doing are the essence of wisdom. Mindfulness, a concept borrowed from Zen Buddhism, is a state of acute awareness, attentiveness, and perceptiveness in everything going on around oneself, while minimising the effects of self and ego. An organisational translation or adaptation of mindfulness is environmental scanning, and the continual appraisal of fit, and responsiveness, to environment. In the individual, achieving mindfulness involves reducing egoistic barriers to perception, partly achieved by increasing recognition of interpretive filters and biases and other internal processes, such as wants, needs, and defensive tendencies. Similar precepts underlie the learning disability literature, as emphasised by Argyris and Schön (1978), Argyris (1982; 1991) and others.

In the model proposed here, consciousness—exploration of the effect and efficacy of one's actions, contributions, and responses—takes the form of reflection

(Densten and Gray (2001); Hays (2004a). Knowledge in action through reflection (Schön, 1983) is central to the thesis of this paper. Reflection manifests and contributes to wisdom; and is underscored in much of the literature on learning, wisdom, organisational change and development, and innovation (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1990; Kitchener and Brenner, 1990; Brookfield, 1995; Daudelin, 1996; Griffith and Frieden, 2000; Bierly, Kessler, and Christense, 2000; Shelton and Darling, 2003).

Being in the moment (not unlike Csikszentmihalyi's (1992) characterisation of *flow*)—fully engaged and liberated from self-centred constraints—is at the objective of the Zen, Confucian, and Taoist striving for humility, emptiness, and detachment / non-attachment. When we can honestly admit we have much to learn, we may just have the chance to do so. The metaphor of the empty vessel, for instance, highlights that much can flow into an empty container, while nothing much will enter one who is already full (of him- or herself!) [see, for example, Huang and Lynch (1995) or Bahm's (1992) interpretations of Confucian writings]. People who are convinced that they *know* or are *right* cannot learn and change; they will not benefit from the multiple viewpoints of others or information available to them that may be discrepant.

When we do not hold on to things, including our beliefs (the idea of "letting go"), we can move on to new and more effective thoughts and behaviours. Non-judgmentalism and tolerance for ambiguity are also key concepts in the wisdom traditions. Parallels to modern learning organisation theory and practice are obvious, as are linkages to recent research on wisdom. Shaw and Perkins (1992) tell us that organisations require cultural norms and practices that promote surfacing, examination, and revision of beliefs and assumptions as "*Letting go ... is difficult at best. Most of us would rather cling to that which we know than experience the discomfort of embracing*

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a new paradigm” (p. 190; emphasis added). Even the allusion (or illusion) of certainty and correctness can undermine learning and change. The conscious or unconscious need to assert power over others has the same debilitating effect. If employees doubt their own observations and ideas or feel they have no power to change things, they will remain silent. To feign knowledge, wield authority, or dominate may feel necessary at the moment, but is probably unwise in the long run. These and other dynamics are explained by and demonstrated in the systems model of organisational wisdom put forward in this paper.

### WHY NOW?

Investigation of wisdom and its business application, to date, has been minimal. Such neglect is understandable given that wisdom is so hard to define and measure. It might also be the case that organisations are not perceived capable of thinking and acting wisely, or that it is assumed that wisdom and the organisational profit motive and self-interests are antithetical. This notwithstanding, elements of the model such as *appreciation for complexity* and *systemic thinking, teamwork and collaboration, focus on learning and adaptability*, and knowing what you know, what you don't know, and what to do about it have everything to do with organisational life and business. This is especially the case in an environment of increasing concern for sustainability, social responsibility, and corporate citizenship, all of which is occurring within a context of accelerating change and competition, blurring boundaries, and uncertainty [see Scharmer, Arthur, Day, Jaworski, Jung, Nonaka, and Senge (2001) for an interesting take on this]. The decision maker of today has an even greater challenge than ever before in history. Things happen more quickly and mistakes may have world-wide consequences. Thus, wise thoughts and actions may be more relevant and necessary than ever before. It makes good sense to learn what we can about wisdom and

emulate wise thinkers and those who act wisely.

In many respects, what has been sought by the proponents of organisational learning—but proven elusive—is embodied in wisdom. As numerous researchers have noted, despite continued and intense focus on organisational learning, and much popular appeal, it has largely remained an ideal, not a practical achievement (Shelton and Darling, 2003; Reynolds and Ablett, 1998; Gorelick, Milton, and April, 2004; Shaw and Perkins, 1992). In turning to organisational learning, executives and advocates are attempting to improve performance and continually improve and innovate (Baker and Sinkula, 2002), become more adaptive and change-able (Griffey, 1998), learn how they learn and become better at learning (Cavaleri and Fearon, 1996), reap the most out of teams and collaborative work groups (Hut and Molleman, 1998), and exploit the lessons of experience and deploy them across the organisation (Ulrich, von Glinow, and Jick, 1993).

It is time to consider wisdom in the organisational context because organisations (and many of the people who populate them) do not think and act wisely; and they need to. Swain (1999, p.31), for example, recently observed:

*“The lack of strategic direction and dysfunctional activities undertaken at enormous cost in terms of wasted human resources and money by organisations should provide sobering lessons in terms of organisational learning and business education. Never before have so many employees had formal business education and management qualifications. How then could the past decade show evidence of so many managers clearly having little strategic appreciation of how to manage an organisation in order to achieve long-term sustainable advantage?”*

If we accept the premise that organisations must learn and change, and must be

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concerned with the future as well as today—that is, they must think and act wisely, and they are not—then an exploration of wisdom is essential. While wisdom is a concept that has had little attention in the management literature, facets of wisdom, though not necessarily referred to as such, have been and continue to be explored. These include Knowledge Management (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Hansen, Nohria, and Tierney, 1999; Thatch and Woodman, 1994); learning and learning disabilities (Argyris, 1982; 1991; Levitt and March, 1988; Lyles, 1994); decision-making and planning (de Geus, 1988; Mintzberg, 1993; 1994; 1996); complexity theory and systems thinking (Gleick, 1987; Goldstein, 1994; Lichtenstein, 2000); positive conflict (Tjosvold, 1992; Pascale, 1991); leadership (Senge, 1990; Swain, 1999; Densten and Gray, 2001; Prewitt, 2003); Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, 1994; Cooper and Sawaf, 1996); innovation (Lin, 2004; Baker and Sinkula, 2002); and organisational development and change (Gill, 2003; Hays; in press); including, and most pertinently, the rich terrain of organisational learning introduced previously.

While independently astute, constructive, and often practical, these varied constructs and their attendant processes and practices have not been productively integrated. At a basic level, the model proposed, here, attempts to integrate some of these discrete, but complementary streams of research. It seems reasonable to think that a practical and effective synthesis could generate even greater returns in terms of learning, innovation, and change. In advancing the proposed dynamic model of organisational wisdom the author hopes to reveal some of the synergies amongst these varied disciplines and topics, and initiate further dialogue and research.

## **WISDOM**

Wisdom is essentially doing the right thing. The wise act judiciously and prudently in the

appreciation of the fullness of context, respond to complex problems in contentious circumstances in a far-sighted and appropriate manner, and care about and prepare for a future that matters. To neglect the fullness of context and limit our horizons is unwise.

Wise thoughts, or wisdom, is generally held to be a function of great intelligence, a wealth of experience, and conviction in values that include serving “the greater good” (Baltes and Staudinger, 2000; Birren and Fisher, Sternberg, 1998). Character traits of the wise person include compassion, empathy, altruism, sagacity, prudence (Orwoll and Perlmutter, 1990), and others, including the ability to see a situation from multiple perspectives and to appreciate the consequences of actions on the future lives and welfare of those people and communities he or she serves. Wise individuals are deeply self-aware (Kitchener and Brenner, 1990; Korac-Kakabadse, Korac-Kakabadse, and Kouzmin, 2001): they know their strengths and their shortcomings; they are sensitive to their own needs, wants, and emotional states.

While deeply committed to and personally responsible for “the common good,” wise individuals have the capacity to detach or “distance” themselves (in terms of satisfying their own egos and self-interests) from the problems confronting them and, thus, can operate objectively and with an open mind. These attributes work in concert to permit exceptional and encompassing consideration of the “big picture” (Cammock, 2003) as well as acute situations, leading to or enabling effective problem-solving and dispute resolution, decision-making and planning, and implementation. These individual traits can and should directly translate to organisations. Increasingly, we see evidence that these same traits are being recommended for and sought by organisations and institutions. They go by names such as corporate social

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responsibility, systems thinking, Emotional Intelligence, and Servant Leadership.

Wise individuals are thought to be few. But we are at least potentially wiser than we may know. Traditionally, the sage was the exclusive carrier of wisdom, and there were not many to be found (Baltes and Staudinger, 2000); however, they note, sages or the wisest of persons offer exemplars to emulate. They add that the more we know about wisdom and how it develops, and the more we promote its development, the greater the likelihood that we may follow in the footsteps of those who have taught us, inspiring in word and deed. Few amongst us would claim to fulfill the description of wisdom proffered in the previous paragraph. This may be a good sign, however. Humility—one of the terms omitted from the foregoing, but also frequently cited to characterise wise individuals (sages)—is thought to play a major role in acquiring and demonstrating wisdom; for, as the Zen master Shunryu Suzuki (2002; p. 21) tells us, “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s mind there are few.”

Bartering for his life, a sage in a traditional Sufi parable admonishes a powerful leader in his day:

*“The first truth... is that you imagine yourself to be a seeker of truth. The second truth is that you only wish to hear the truth as you currently conceive it. The third truth is that you will only know the truth when you know yourself to be ignorant” (Van de Weyer, 2004; p. 102; emphasis added).*

While [exceptional] intelligence and wisdom are often used synonymously, they are not the same. One may be very intelligent and, yet, not be or act wisely. Intelligence enables us to think, analyse, and solve problems within specific and known contexts. Wisdom transcends typical problems and known contexts. The wise person can generate

useful solutions in novel circumstances, limited not by what he or she has learned through previous study or experience. Previous learning and experience may bias and limit understanding of context (reality in its fullness and *things as they are*). The wise individual is able to see with clarity into complex situations, understand dynamic relationships concerning cause and effect, and make decisions or take actions that serve the interests of the common good.

There are clear parallels between intelligence and wisdom, as distinguished here, and single-loop and double-loop learning (Kaplan and Norton, 1996; Korth, 2000) [and, perhaps, more significantly, from wisdom to triple-loop learning (Foldy and Creed, 1999; Romme and van Witteloostuijn, 1999; Isaacs (19XX)). At the risk of oversimplifying, single-loop, lower-level learning entails simple adaptations and corrective actions, and answers the question, *are we doing things right?* Double-loop or higher-order learning involves reframing – seeing things in a new light, surfacing and challenging assumptions, debating whether or not norms, policies, objectives, practices remain valid, and asking, *are we doing the right things?* Finally, triple-loop or transcendent learning invokes collaborative development of new processes or methodologies for arriving at reframings. It is “collective mindfulness,” asking questions such as *how do we come to see the world and how do we know if our perception is close to reality?*

What enables such profound thought and action are mediating factors related mostly to values (Item 24 on the diagram), a life orientation that esteems and practices compassion, loving-kindness, consideration for all life, tolerance, and a oneness or unity with all elements of our universe (Griffey, 1998; Shelton and Darling, 2003; Wheatley, 1994), a sense of soul (Cammock, 2003), and empathy (Goleman, 1998). This may sound lofty and irrelevant to the business and its objectives and practices. But perhaps



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expanding objectives to encompass contribution to the greater good (or at least a reduction in harm) is just what is needed to make our organisations friendlier and more meaningful places to work. Research cited in this paragraph and others (Sendjaya and Sarros, 2002; Sarros, 2002; Greenleaf, 1977) shows an increasing awareness of and commitment to higher ideals, stewardship and service, and a greater appreciation for the consequences of our actions.

Some researchers into wisdom emphasise its practical nature. It seems reasonable, however, to assume that one can learn and even be wise without direct and immediate indication of it. In fact, three types of wisdom have been historically characterised, as summarised by Robinson (1990): *Sophia* – a contemplative, more introspective search for truth, which is probably most like the spiritual wisdom traditions, and where wisdom is least likely to be most blatant; *Phronesis* – a practical kind of wisdom as measured by day-today effectiveness; and *Episteme* – a more scientific, rationally-grounded type of wisdom.

Given their practical requirements, it is likely that *Phronesis* and *Episteme* would be the classifications of wisdom most evident in and attractive to organisations. They are tangible and logical. *Sophia* links more closely to spirit, wholeness, and deeper meaning. Recognising that organisations are also meaning-making, social environments, they may depend on and provide *Sophia* as well. A wise organisation probably integrates the three types of wisdom.

## ORGANISATIONAL WISDOM AS A SYSTEM

Figure 1 depicts organisational wisdom as a complex, dynamic system. This particular kind of diagram is known as a relationship map and is the author's version of a causal loop diagram. Such maps are characteristic of soft systems thinking (Checkland, 1985) with its focus on the construction and use of

systems models to explore complex problems and promote learning (see also Senge, 1990a), and have been used to portray aspects of learning and related dynamic management relationships (Hays and Winter, 2004). These models are not expected to capture reality completely, but to help managers better describe their unique situations. In the process, their perceptions about how things operate are revealed, and their biases, beliefs, and assumptions may be surfaced and challenged.

While evolving and expected to change as a result of further testing, research, dialogue, and feedback, the model presented here currently is comprised of 24 elements. While inter-dependent, the elements each uniquely influence the development and expression of organisational wisdom. The individual elements are listed in Table 1. Due to space limitations, only those variables most central to organisational wisdom and that push the limits of organisational learning are thoroughly explained. These core elements are **bolded** in Table 1. Three points, here, deserve emphasis:

- ▶ Each element is important to how the system operates, so must be individually understood.
- ▶ All variables must be understood to be acting in concert and synergistically within and as the system.
- ▶ A thorough understanding of one or even a handful of the elements cannot fully explain why organisational learning fails and wisdom cannot be achieved.

Coming to an understanding of the dynamics of organisational wisdom involves identifying and establishing relationships amongst key variables. The 24 variables introduced above are complex constructs, definition and measurement of which are difficult and uncertain at best. The model shows both detail and dynamic complexity (Senge, 1990b); *detail* referring to the high number of variables and *dynamic* to subtlety

and indirectness of the relationships amongst system elements. Relationships amongst the factors are dynamic, non-linear, and complex [see Miner and Mezias (1996) and Thomas, Sussman, and Henderson (2001)]; capturing them is as much an art or an

intuitive, speculative process as it is a science. The model incorporates the theory, practice, and philosophy of wisdom and related streams, with the objective to begin to reveal the complexity and reality of organisational learning and wisdom.

|   |  |                                    |
|---|--|------------------------------------|
| 1. Emphasis on Learning and Adaptability.   | 9. Systems Thinking.                         | 17. What Works; What Doesn't.      |
| 2. Domain / Content Training and Education. | 10. <b>Biases, Beliefs, and Assumptions.</b> | 18. Perceived Value of Reflection. |
| 3. Teamwork and Collaboration.              | 11. <b>Context.</b>                          | 19. Opportunity.                   |
| 4. Appreciation for Complexity.             | 12. <b>Learning.</b>                         | 20. Competence.                    |
| 5. Knowledge.                               | 13. <b>Reflection.</b>                       | 21. Confidence                     |
| 6. General Approach to Problem-Solving.     | 14. <b>Wise Thoughts.</b>                    | 22. Motivation.                    |
| 7. Experience.                              | 15. <b>Effective Actions and Strategies.</b> | 23. Incentives.                    |
| 8. Learning and Thinking Styles.            | 16. Successful Outcomes.                     | 24. Values.                        |

Table 1. The 24 Elements Comprising the Organisational Wisdom System.

There was no intended, predetermined logic to the arrangement of the factors comprising the dynamic relationship map of wisdom presented here. The design emerged from an initial batch of a dozen factors surfacing from review of related literatures and

discussion with interested colleagues. Three main types of literature were reviewed. First and foremost was modern management literature, primarily drawing on that focusing on organisational learning.

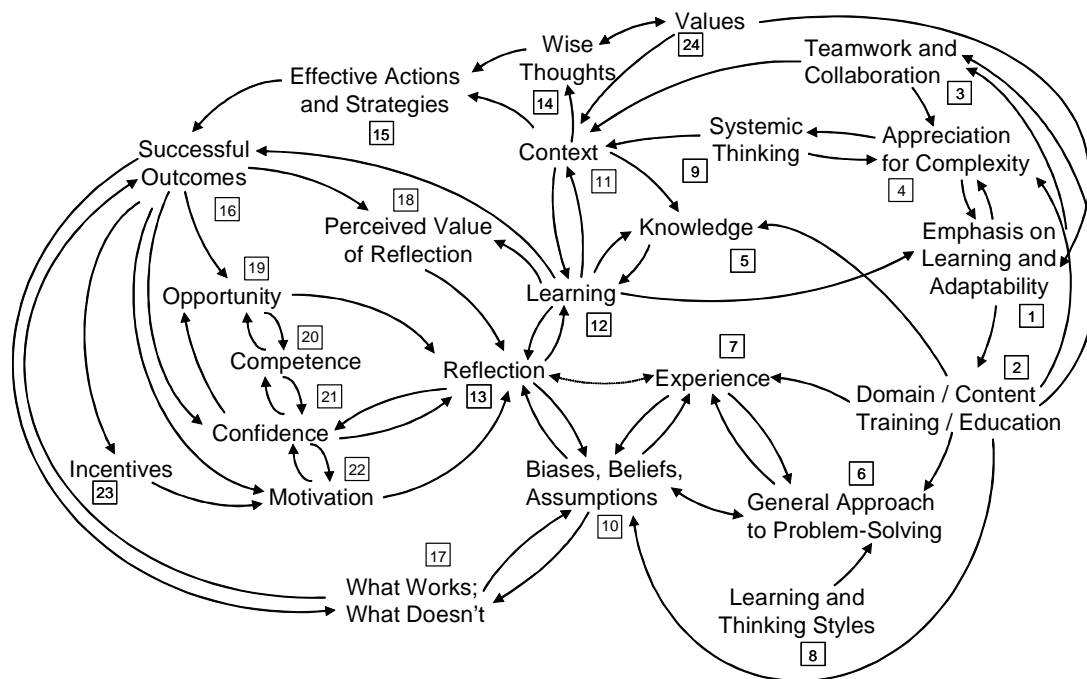


Figure 1. Dynamic Model of Organisational Wisdom.

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Also mined was literature on wisdom from the disciplines of psychology (notably Baltes and Staudinger, 1993, 2000; Birren and Fisher, 1990; Kitchener and Brenner, 1990; and Sternberg, 1998, 2003); philosophy (Arnoud and LeBon, 2000; Korak-Kakabase, Korac-Kakabase, and Kouzmin, 2001; Robinson, 1990); and human development (Cooper and Sawaf, 1996; Gardner, 1993; Kolb, 1984). Selected writings on wisdom and the wise from traditional Confucian, Sufi, Taoist, and Zen Buddhist sources were also reviewed. Additionally, the author's personal experiences with Native American teachers provided context for some of the ideas incorporated here. Future investigation intends to explore indigenous (e.g., Australian Aboriginal) and African tribal wisdom for their potential application to modern, Western management and organisation science, in a unique reversal of the typical technology transfer from "advanced" to supposedly primitive cultures.

While each of these streams adds unique perspective and value on wisdom, there is an amazing amount of overlap across these sources. As examples, similarities and complements are seen in the emphasis on:

- ▶ Seeing the big picture; separating details from principles or trends, and symptoms from problems and causes, attending to the few issues and factors that really matter.
- ▶ Understanding complexity in problems and situations, particularly from multiple vantage points and through the eyes of diverse stakeholders.
- ▶ Recognising the limits of knowledge and knowing, including our inability to see reality *as it is*, but as coloured by our own lenses; acknowledging the nature, affects, and possibilities of multiple realities.
- ▶ Doing the right thing—that which serves the greater good and does the least overall harm; minimising self-interest; the value of honesty—even when it hurts.

- ▶ The notion that the self is inseparable from the system in which it resides; that the individual is linked to the object of study.

While wisdom is all around us, it is seldom dealt with academically. If investigated scientifically, it seems to lose something. Perhaps the tendency to narrow definitions and scope of wisdom derives from a reasonable concern for objective measurement and as a matter of precision. The organisational learning / organisational development, change, and innovation literature reminds us of our positivist scientific heritage and emphasises that logic, rationality, predictability, control and so on are necessary to management and improvement, but insufficient to learning and change (see, for example, Stata, 1989, or Gill, 2003). Chaos theory, quantum physics, and Zen Buddhism tell us about the illusory nature of control, and the value of unpredictability, emergence, and "letting go" [see Goldstein, 1994; Lichtenstein (2000); or Hensler, Edgeman, and Guerrero-Cusumano; (2000). The case is often and compellingly made that what we see is not what is.

As both practitioner and academic, the author supports Ray Stata's admonition to universities "...to set aside their preference for tidy 'academic research,' and, instead, confront messy, real-life management issues (1989; p. 73). Mostly what we see is messy, complicated, and, at best, imprecisely predictable (as exemplified by Figure 1...). Often what is not worth talking about, really is; what we take for granted, shouldn't be. Our intelligence and our egos tend to get in the way of wisdom.

## **DYNAMIC MODEL OF ORGANISATIONAL WISDOM**

### **Introduction and General Character**

The dynamic model of organisational wisdom proposed here focuses on reflection as the mechanism that links and promotes learning, exploiting experience and building useful knowledge. Reflection is a process,

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discipline, and skill that is relatively simple to learn and adopt. While there are reasons individuals may discount or neglect reflection (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Senge, 1990b), the value it can have is indisputable (Hays, 2004a).

Learning (Item 12) is conspicuous by virtue of its location smack in the middle of the diagram. Wisdom (indicated by Wise Thoughts (14) and Effective Actions and Strategies (15) is not an “end state,” but an evolving condition continually fed by learning and mediated by Context (11). A core characteristic of the wise is a passion for knowledge, coupled with an acknowledgement of how little is known, which motivates learning. Add to this an ongoing *mindfulness* of the learning process in which one is engaged, including one’s own styles, tendencies, weaknesses, and learning objectives and requirements, and the result may be continuous learning and improvements in learning to learn. Mindfulness is promoted through reflection.

Wisdom implies a synergy amongst intelligence, knowledge, and experience. Organisations generally have these elements, but lack synergy. What organisations need are improved processes that promote the synergy amongst intelligence, knowledge, and experience and allow employees at all levels to exploit the synergy. Reflective thinking and learning is one such process, especially given full appreciation of context that includes important shared values.

### **Brief Walk-Through of the Model**

**1. *Emphasis on Learning and Adaptability.*** Organisations are increasingly realising that they must rapidly learn and adapt. They must not only respond to a continuously changing, dynamic, and complex environment, but they must ready themselves for threats and opportunities with which they have not previously had to contend. They must become *change-able* and forward-thinking (Lin, 2004). Emphasis

on learning and adaptability is embodied in a set of cultural conditions operating dynamically to inhibit or promote learning and change. Stata (1989) reminds us that, “The values and culture of an organisation have a significant impact on the learning process and on how effectively a company can adapt and change” (p. 70). The values orientation and culture of the organisation include beliefs, expectations, and practices governing strategic priorities, organisational initiatives and particularly how they are implemented, associated systems, mechanics, and processes, and notions as what people believe is important, how things are done and who does them, how and what people are encouraged to learn and do, opportunities provided, and who gets rewarded and for what (Hays and Winter, 2004)

**2. *Domain / Content Training and Education.*** The content and emphasis of domain-specific training and education promotes skills and knowledge held to be of critical importance to the organisation, including the way individuals in the organisation, and the organisation as a general rule, approach and solve problems. In so doing it may reassure senior managers that organisational capability is being developed or maintained, and may also achieve the perception that the organisation is investing in its future and in its employees. At the same time, such focus may provide a false sense of capability and limit consideration of other competencies that may be needed. These dynamics are inferred by the loop to and through Biases, Beliefs, and Assumptions.

In thinking about what is important to know and how to go about educating employees, it seems particularly useful for organisations to consider the significant differences between single-loop and double-loop learning, whether more of the same or something else entirely is needed, to explore whether or not and to what degree the assumptions made

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about employee / organisational capability are promoting or inhibiting progress.

**3. *Teamwork and Collaboration.*** Building teamwork and collaboration is a set of strategies to promote dialogue across organisations, expose and explore cross-functional differences and exploit diversity, and foster unity of effort, all of which can improve learning and innovation (Thompson, 2004). There is no question that teams and teamwork are on the rise in all types of businesses (Campion, Medsker, and Higgs, 1993; Cohen and Bailey, 1997), essentially because teams are believed to promote productivity / performance, as well as employee satisfaction. Teams also comply with emerging thought and practices in worker empowerment and autonomy (Hut and Molleman, 1998; Kirkman and Rosen, 2001).

In the model, the link between teamwork and collaboration and context suggests that within cross-functional teams lies more combined and fuller knowledge of the organisation and its environment. Appreciation for complexity may result from the very function of working together in teams or attempting to collaborate. The challenges and conflicts that arise from the diversity (Jehn, 1995) serve to remind people that everyone is different and have complementary skills and perspectives. Drawn from diverse areas, members of cross-functional teams bring unique (if partial) views of the organisation and its environment to the teams. These multiple views are what allows better problem-solving and more effective decision-making (that is, if the challenge and conflict of diversity can be harnessed). The rich literature on positive conflict (C+), exemplified by Tjosvold (1991) and Pascale (1991) covers this dynamic. It is also believed that such diversity or multiplicity of views is essential for innovation (Lin, 2004; Nadler and Hibino, 1994).

The model suggests that there is a link between Domain / Content Training / Education and Teamwork and Collaboration. Considerable experience in a wide range of businesses and organisations reveals this to be more of an ideal than a reality. Teams seldom have sufficient initial training or on-going team-building, inhibiting their effectiveness and undermining the potential they might offer the organisation (Hays, 2004b).

**4. *Appreciation for Complexity.*** Awareness that problems are not often as simple as we would like them to be and that arriving at and implementing effective solutions to complex problems may require much more investment than we are willing and able to give comes from and contributes to systemic thinking. That is, the more we know about and appreciate complexity, the more we tend to think systemically. While emphasis on learning and adaptability does not automatically lead to appreciation for complexity, appreciation for complexity (and systems thinking) are foundational elements of the learning organisation (Senge, 1990; Stacey, 1996; Wheatley, 1994): simple solutions for complex problems are few.

Increasing appreciation for complexity should be a corporate goal. Requiring employees to rigorously study problems (particularly when they assume the causes are clear) and develop a range of alternative solutions, speculating on possible outcomes of each, are methods that build skills while increasing the likelihood that effective solutions can be found. More typically, the first reasonable-sounding suggestion is often embraced and implemented, with no analysis after the fact to determine why it worked or why it didn't. This reinforces tendencies to over-simplify.

**5. *Knowledge.*** Knowledge is integral to wisdom and plays a central, but perhaps surprisingly different relationship to wisdom than is generally considered. Knowledge can

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both promote and limit learning. Learning and Knowledge mutually influence one another. As learning increases, for example, knowledge increases. In the opposite direction, knowledge impacts learning a bit differently, influencing both what is learned and how learning occurs. What is known and how one has come to know determine what we look for, what we see (Dearborn and Simon, 1958; Walsh, 1988), whether or not we believe something we have observed is important, whether or not how we think the way we are approaching the task is right for us, and so on. In many respects, knowledge biases us (link not shown on Figure 1). The more we know, the less likely we are to question our beliefs and assumptions (van Woerkom, Nijhof, and Nieuwenhuis, 2002).

Knowledge does not directly lead to wise thoughts or effective actions and strategies. We may all have known or observed people who are very knowledgeable in one or more discipline but who have not acted wisely or seem “clueless” in some areas of their lives. The same dynamic that occurs at the individual level may also operate organisationally.

Individual and organisational knowledge are different and must be distinguished. There may be many knowledgeable people in an organisation, but the organisation, itself, will only be knowledgeable and capable (able to capitalise upon that distributed knowledge) to the extent that it can centralise, organise, and transfer knowledge and skills efficiently and effectively amongst its many members and other stakeholders within and across business units (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Stata, 1989; Swain, 1999).

#### **6. General Approach to Problem-Solving.**

Problem-solving approaches derive in part from Domain / Content Training and Education. Preferential patterns may also form over time, as suggested by Kolb (1984), Lazear (1991), and others. Importantly, our approach to problem-solving influences experience as well. Our training, education, and previous experience

condition us to attend to and act on certain phenomena over others; some observations will get through our relevance filters; others won't (see, for example, Griffey, 1998). This is influenced by our Biases, Beliefs, and Assumptions, which are further defined by our experience! Tucker, Edmondson, and Spear (2002) found that the majority of employees predominantly use a lower order of problem solving (similar to Argyris' single-loop learning), perhaps because they are driven by immediacy and urgency to deal with crises as they occur and “get on with their business.” Such a natural tendency reduces symptoms of problems (at least temporarily) and is self-reinforcing; but undermines consideration of systemic issues, patterns of behaviour, and long-term consequences. Higher-order problem solving (double-loop learning) does not occur.

**7. Experience.** Experience is generally held to be a good thing. While for the purposes of this model, experience and knowledge are treated separately, it is easy to accept that experience connotes accumulated knowledge with respect to practical concerns or in certain domains. Experience does not directly or automatically lead to broader knowledge. It can be, and perhaps often is, an important contributor to knowledge, but is not in and of itself sufficient. Experience can be negative, because how and what we experience may reinforce bad habits and counter-productive behaviour (Prahalad and Bettis, 1986).

Experience can lead to both increasing knowledge and to wisdom, but primarily through reflection. A more experienced person is not necessarily a wise person, although a wise individual may possess a wealth of experience and is generally held to do so (Baltes, Staudinger, Maercker, and Smith, 1995). And, while age and maturity often correlate with people thought wise, we know through experience that a person may be wise beyond his or her years.

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**8. Learning and Thinking Styles.** Knowing about learning and thinking styles and understanding the implications for individual and team are important because of the influence they have on problem-solving and decision-making, as well as how corporate-related training and education are conducted (Berings, Poell, and Simons, 2005). Awareness of differences in learning and thinking styles helps one place within context the assertions, speculations, and actions of others in problem-solving and decision-making situations. Also importantly, diversity is a key contributor to creativity and robustness of solutions to new or complex problems; that is, if synergy is attained amongst diverse perspective, preference, and concerted action (Lattimer, 1998).

**9. Systems Thinking.** The more we accept that situations are complex and involved, and the more equipped we are to deal with complexity, the better our decisions and solutions are likely to be (Shelton and Darling, 2003). Systems thinking begins with the realisation that any problem or challenge occurs within and is an integral part of a system. Bringing systems thinking to problem-solving and decision-making concerns identifying and working with patterns, relationships and inter-dependencies amongst elements in a particular system (Appelbaum and Goransson, 1997). Applying systems thinking to problems is an attempt to effectively deal with “the whole” and its complexity. Seeing an organisational challenge through systems lenses allows managers to apply the concept of leverage. Leverage is a term denoting that small, focused interventions appropriately applied can produce substantial change (Senge, 1990). The idea of leverage is a key reason why the wisdom model presented here can be of such practical value to managers. Understanding the factors involved in their system, and their dynamic relationships, can indicate just where to intervene in a way that will make a significant difference.

A lot of our current problems and failed solutions can be explained by our unfortunate predilection to simplify (Prahalad and Bettis, 1986). Our typical response to problems is to attack the most painful symptom and to select a remedy that seems to most directly and immediately relieve the pain. As we often discover with palliatives, the headache may go away temporarily, but its cause does not.

**10. Biases, Beliefs, and Assumptions.** Biases, beliefs, and assumptions may be thought of as a set of lenses through which we observe and interpret the world and our position in it. Each individual will have his or her own unique set of lenses formed inexorably over his or her lifetime, including current circumstances and organisational role (Kim, 1994; Thompson, 1996).

This astute and provocative quote from Zukav, cited in Shelton and Darling (2003, p. 355), highlights the intricacy, subtlety, and influence of biases, beliefs, and assumptions:

*“Reality is what we take to be true. What we take to be true is what we believe. What we believe is based upon our perceptions. What we perceive depends upon what we look for. What we look for depends on what we think. What we think depends on what we perceive. What we perceive determines what we believe. What we believe determines what we take to be true. What we take to be true is our reality”.*

Our thinking and behaviour often operate in this circular, self-perpetuating manner, persistently living out our subjective, incomplete view of the world and understanding of problems and their causes, and applying solutions that by definition are limited and likely inadequate.

Each organisation and sub-culture within it will have a collective mindset that colours and focuses the lenses of its members. What may be difficult to fully comprehend and

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accept is that what we see and experience is not a complete and accurate picture. "We do not see things as they are; we see them as we are," Anais Nin is credited with saying (emphasis added). The *Talmud* is also said to be a source of this statement (Lieberman and Lieberman, 2001). Taoist and Zen philosophies further inform us that all observations and beliefs are fundamentally personal opinion, even regarding our own existence; that is, they cannot be anything except interpretations through our own lenses. Coming to see reality (*things as they are*) is one of the major goals of Zen Buddhism and is a foundation for and indicator of enlightenment (Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde, 1990; Fletcher and Scott, 2001). Critical to this capacity are the abilities to distance oneself from the phenomenon being observed and view it objectively (this is known as detachment) and to see situations from multiple perspectives, which is similar to empathy (Kegan, 1995; Mezirow, 1990).

**11. Context.** Context includes all factors relevant within a period of time. The potential range of contextual factors is essentially infinite, but includes such elements and considerations as stakeholders, their sentiments, and their relative influence; resources available, physical and mental; competing and complementary priorities; and competitors' strengths. Apprehended in its fullness or not, the context of any complex situation consists of highly- and moderately-relevant factors, as well as factors that may truly be, or be perceived to be, irrelevant. The discerning thinker may be the one who best grasps what is and what is not relevant. Individuals and the larger organisation learn more about themselves and their environment as understanding of context increases. Of relevance is discovering more about what is, and what is not known, what the organisation is and is not capable of.

A wise act is a deliberate one that concerns the common good; it serves interests greater than the self. Senge (1990b, p.13) writes:

*"Leaders engaged in building learning organizations naturally feel part of a larger purpose that goes beyond their organization. They are part of changing the way businesses operate ... from a conviction that their efforts will produce more productive organizations, capable of achieving higher levels of organizational success and personal satisfaction than more traditional organizations".*

Implied also is that the context is understood in its breadth and depth. That is, a wise decision is one taken with consideration of the complexity of the situation. The system is the context. Tying this to leadership, Petrick, Scherer, Brodzinski, Quinn, and Ainina (1999) write that "Excellent global leaders... are able to understand complex issues from different strategic perspectives (p. 60) and "exercise[e] balanced judgment in strategic decision-making" (p. 65). A wise decision would, for example, consider the positions of various stakeholders and the consequences of action on all stakeholder groups, including future generations (Petrick, et al., 1999)

**12. Learning.** Learning is a vast field, touching on and drawing from many disciplines, notably education and psychology, and including sociology and anthropology. Increasingly, learning has become a subject in management science, as well, and has been central to the study and practice of Organisational Development since its beginnings (see, Hendry, 1996; Lundberg, 1989; Mintzberg and Westley, 1992; Van de Ven and Poole, 1995).

Knowledge influences both what is learned and how learning occurs. In some respects, the more we know, the more we can come to know (learn). This is because we can more easily integrate new material into more encompassing frameworks, like having more



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drawers to put things in. Also, the more we have learned, that is, actively accumulated knowledge, the easier it may be *to learn*. Over time, we hone our learning skills. These two advantages can operate to our disadvantage, as well, unfortunately. What is known and how one has come to know may narrow what we look for and limit what we see (Argyris, 1991). Over time, we may develop myopia in our thinking, conditioned by our prior Knowledge and Experience and how we obtained it.

The more greatly we are aware of our biases, beliefs, and assumptions, and the more effectively we continually test out their validity, the more proficiently we will learn. Mezirow (1994) notes that dialogue—central to communication and learning—is one way to critically examine what we do, how we do it, and more importantly, why? Such dialogue should target assumptions and beliefs through what he calls “critical premise reflection.” Collaboratively constructing a relationship diagram such as the one proposed here to elucidate wisdom in the organisational context is one technique to promote such consideration of biases, beliefs, and assumptions. Supposition—even if wrong—is okay as long as it leads to further debate, dialogue, clarification, and improved understanding.

**13. Reflection.** Reflection and reflective practices appear to be becoming more popular and are figuring in topics from leadership and leadership development to organisational learning (Densten and Gray, 2001; Lichtenstein, 2000; Mezirow (1990; 1994; Schön, 1983; 1987). Citing research by Daudelin (1996), Griffith and Frieden (2000), and others, Hays (2004a) notes that reflection is the active and on-going practice of thinking on material, problems, situations, and experiences and their meaning and relation to self. This involves surfacing and exploring theories, beliefs, and assumptions that contribute to understanding, problem-solving, and decision-making. The reflector is asked to put him- or herself fully “in the

picture,” as a participating, interacting, and contributing agent to dynamics within a given system or problem context.

Reflection often has the connotation of a passive kind of thought, as invoked by words (processes) such as contemplation, rumination, meditation, and musing. While these terms do apply, in this context, reflection is a more active and deliberate process. In fact, *deliberation* may be used interchangeably with reflection. Active or passive, reflection requires a “time out.” That is, reflection is unlikely, or minimally effective, when one is “caught up” in a stream of work activity, decision-making pressure, or conflict (Easterby-Smith, 1990; Thatchenkery, 1996).

The inability (or unwillingness) to find time and space to reflect is part of a vicious cycle that precludes wise thoughts and effective strategies and actions. Specifically, as reflection diminishes, the opportunity to learn reduces. As learning is minimised, mistakes, accidents, and failures continue to occur, negatively impacting successful outcomes, and increasing chaos, confusion, and crisis-fighting, further reducing wise, or prudent, thoughts, decisions, plans, and actions. As effective actions and strategies erode, successful outcomes reduce, which places further pressure on the system.

Reflection (as in reflect) obviously has a sense of looking back, as in reviewing a process or actions leading to a particular outcome. This is a relevant view on reflection, as we may learn through critical, but open-minded review of events, interactions, actions-responses, and our respective roles associated with them, including whether or not and how we are learning [Schön (as discussed in Lichtenstein, 2000)]. As used here, however, reflection also has a sense of looking forward. Lin (2003) states that organisations must have *hindsight* (reviewing or reflecting back), *insight* (that acuity and perspicacity into complex problems and situations), and

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*foresight* (thinking ahead, planning and preparing for the unknowable; understanding the long-term consequences of actions today). Each of these is a valid domain for reflection.

The wise person is a reflective person (Kitchener and Brenner, 1990). By extension, the wise organisation is a reflective one. While perhaps under-emphasised in the management literature, the contributing role of reflection in organisational learning has found support (Nonaka, 1994; Lichtenstein, 2000; Densten and Gray, 2001; van Woerkom, Nijhof, and Nieuwenhuis, 2002).

**14. Wise Thoughts.** If wisdom can be defined as *acting prudently in the appreciation of the fullness of context*, then wise thoughts are the integrated result of context, learning, and reflection. Both knowledge and intelligence are contributors to wisdom, as are values. Experience is also related to wisdom and is generally accepted to be a major contributor to wisdom. Sternberg (2003) notes that wisdom requires knowledge, but more of the kind acquired in life experience, not school learning or erudition. As has been said, however, there is a big difference between twenty years of experience and one year of experience repeated twenty times. Breadth of experience counts, but, more important is what one does with the experience; in other words, how one incorporates it and learns and changes as a result. This is the central role played by reflection (Sharratt and Field, 1993).

It is generally accepted that some minority of individuals are or may become wise. The same should hold true for organisations. Griffley (1998) has evocatively argued that organisations [may] proceed through three levels of learning, from a general learning culture, through a wisdom culture, and finally to a culture of enlightenment. This second

stage is "...of a higher order than a general learning culture because it provides the conditions for *coming to know reality*...." (p. 68; emphasis added) Coming to know reality, as it is, is characteristic of wisdom. The significance of Griffley's work, here, is that organisations can come to see and know themselves, and thus operate, in a transcendent way. This means they acknowledge, understand, and counter the blinders and unproductive behaviours that limit learning and performance.

To make this practicable, Griffley (1998, p.72) provides the following guidance:

*"The wise organisation will have structures, strategies and a culture of learning in the direction of the second mode of knowing. These organisational features will reflect a valuing of intuition and spontaneity, awareness, mindfulness, direct experiencing, ecological and systemic perspectives, space and time for reflection and incubation of thought, meditation, intrinsic worth of learning, anthropocentric perspectives, kindness, the transpersonal model of self, the dissociation of self-esteem and competence."*

Through valuing and applying these attributes and processes, Griffley concludes, "...the vast resources of the human mind can be most efficiently put to the task of learning to experience and know reality" (ibid.)

**15. Effective Actions and Strategies.** It may be difficult to determine where wise thoughts break off and effective actions and strategies begin. Certainly, decision-making and planning are needed before effective actions can be carried out, and these are only relative to and can only be effective within a particular Context. Decision-making and planning techniques may be analytical, thorough, and methodical; but they may not be wise. Wisdom is brought to bear in the way context is understood and embraced, and the actions that ensue. Values play a

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large part in this. For example, if a leader accepts stewardship of his or her community, then long-term consequences and sustainability are more salient than short-term profit or ease. A more practical example is the decision by a leader to invest in developing people and creating a supportive work environment as part of on-going initiatives. Here, some impedance to immediate progress is accepted in return for future capability. Adopting a team-based approach to continuous improvement could be expected to drain resources and require time to ramp up before returning dividends. But employees will be able to use the problem-solving, decision-making, planning, implementation, and evaluation skills they develop on a wide range of projects, long into the future.

**16. Successful Outcomes.** Everybody likes success. Success is rewarding and motivating; it validates what we have done and encourages us to do more. It can be a two-edged sword, however, cutting deeply when we are mistaken about what led to success. Failure can pose the same problem when we fail to recognise what complex of events and actions truly led to failing (Argyris, 1982,1991; Kitchener and Brenner, 1990; Nystrom and Starbuck, 1984; Shaw and Perkins, 1992; Thompson, 1996; Tucker, Edmondson, and Spear, 2002). In either case, we fail to learn or we learn the wrong thing. The implications of this is that we might persist in certain behaviours and strategies believing they lead to success, when they may actually have little instrumentally to do with it. On the other hand, we might tend to discard one strategy after another to remediate problem performance, not really knowing what is causing us to fail. This is one area where reflecting can make a substantial difference. Sufficient time and skill in reflecting will increase awareness of the affect of biases, beliefs, and assumptions on our thinking and will increase Learning, thus, ultimately, feeding successful outcomes. Applied to the team or organisational context, collaborative

reflection (van Woerkom, Nijhof, and Nieuwenhuis, 2002) and Action Learning (Foldy and Creed, 1999) can help employees to collectively better understand causality and, thus, improve the processes and outcomes of problem-solving and decision-making

The good thing about reflection is that it is useful in conditions of success, failure, and moderate performance. One can learn from an open-minded critique of any of these situations. Naturally, organisations would more likely critically evaluate poor performance or a crisis than they would a success or sustained superior performance. And while these investigations may occur, more often than not they are probably more critical and analytical than reflective. The two views may be dichotomised as *to find and correct the fault* versus *to learn what we can from the failure*.

**17. What Works; What Doesn't.** What works and what doesn't is often the result of the learning from experience people talk so much about. Feedback suggests do more, do less, do something differently. Feedback is often insufficient, however. There are a number of reasons for this. As a general rule, people don't solicit feedback that might jeopardise their feelings of efficacy (Lichtenstein, 2000). Furthermore, feedback (consequences and outcomes) on many of our actions is long in the coming and we may not be capable of making direct linkages (Appelbaum and Goransson, 1997), especially the case with dynamic complexity (Senge, 1990b). Our interpretations (taken as givens) of what works and what doesn't are heavily influenced by and perhaps inseparable from biases, beliefs, and assumptions. A wealth of research points to the distinction between single-loop and double-loop learning, and placing a high value on the latter (as examples, Lyles, 1994; Tucker, Edmondson, and Spear, 2001). It is only through higher-order thinking and problem-solving that correct connections between cause and effect can be

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consistently made. Critical reflection should help us to better understand and be more conscious about our behaviour and its affects (Kaplan and Norton, 1996; Brown and Posner, 2001; Densten and Gray, 2001; and van Woerkom, Nijhof, and Nieuwenhuis, 2002).

**18. *Perceived Value of Reflection.***

Perceived value of reflection is merely a function of successful outcomes where success is at least partially attributed to reflection and the learning it promotes. Learning may be experienced as its own reward, thus reinforcing and increasing the perceived value of reflection, when the connection to reflection is made. Emphasising progress and achievements brought about by reflection will increase its perceived value and contribution. Unfortunately, few organisations appear to acknowledge and promote reflection or more deliberate and time-taking problem-solving and decision-making habits (Levitt and March, 1988; Appelbaum and Goransson, 1997; Tucker, Edmundson, and Spear, 2001). To overcome this tendency to assume understanding of cause and reduce thought time, the “rush to fix,” syndrome, organisations will need to foster a supportive environment for reflection, emphasising its value and rewarding employees who show evidence of reflection (Griffley, 1998).

**19. *Opportunity.*** Opportunity encompasses access to and participation in the affairs of the organisation and the running of the business. This includes problem-solving, decision-making, planning, implementation, training and professional development. This is about both individual learning and development, and organisational capability-building. Opportunity is also linked to positions and tasks that are perceived by employees as interesting and meaningful, and offer greater levels of responsibility and autonomy. Commitment to and direction of opportunity relate to the organisation’s values and philosophy, most relevantly to its

emphasis on learning and adaptability and / or domain / content training and education.

Too often, employees are restricted in their opportunities to develop their skills and learn more about the organisation and its broader context. For example, managers make assumptions about employees’ ability and / or motivation, or their level of responsibility, which cause them to limit opportunities for employees. At the same time, more sophisticated and challenging jobs are given to those who already have the skills and relationships needed to do the job. This serves the interests of speed, economy, and risk reduction, but fails to build organisational capability. Managers must seriously consider the short-term costs versus the long-term gains when it comes to assigning work and developing people (see Repenning and Sterman, 2001, for an interesting take on this).

**20. *Competence.*** Competence comes from all of the deliberate and inherent developmental opportunities to which an employee or team has access, including domain / content training / education, on the job training / experience and more general professional development, both inside and outside of the organisation. As competence increases, opportunity increases. Those who “can” are recognised and advanced. In the typical, traditional organisation this tendency concentrates confidence and competence in a minority, undermining capability-building across a wider spectrum of employees. This unintended consequence of a seemingly reasonable preference has been described elsewhere as the “White Knight Syndrome” (Hays, 2005, in press). Appelbaum and Goransson (1997) refer to this phenomenon as “the illusion of taking charge,” while Repenning and Sterman (2001) call such individuals “war heroes,” driven, capable people who groom and favour others like themselves. The “white knight” is called upon or volunteers when adversity (in the guise of crisis) rears its head. The majority of employees are prevented (or, in some

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cases, hold themselves back) from doing battle and acquiring essential seasoning. For the sake of efficiency and to protect employees, insidious white knight behaviour dampens ownership and restrains capability-building.

**21. Confidence.** As Competence increases so does confidence. One can go forward more securely when one feels capable. Organisational supports that enable the employee to feel equipped and empowered to do the job must be the focus of constant attention. The degree to which the environment is supportive of performance and development and equips employees to continually improve is probably a direct result of the emphasis on learning and adaptability. This embodies corporate values that esteem the individual and care about his or her growth as a person and as a contributing member of the organisation or institution. In their review of the literature and subsequent research, van Woerkom, Nijhof, and Nieuwenhuis (2002) found that confidence, or what they alternatively term self-efficacy, is a substantial factor in learning and performance, impacting such behaviour as sharing, challenging “group think” (Janis, 1977), seeking feedback, experimentation, and honest reflection. They conclude that self-efficacy is crucial to engaging in collaborative double-loop learning; if an organisation aspires to higher-order thinking and problem solving, then a focus on developing employee self-efficacy should be a high priority.

**22. Motivation.** An increase in confidence positively influences motivation. This is a consequence of the individual believing that he or she can accomplish a task, that is, possesses requisite skills and talents, and has access to enabling conditions and resources. While motivation, as shown in the diagram, is fed both by successful outcomes directly (success is inherently rewarding) and through Incentives, such motivation may be thwarted in the absence of confidence, competence, and opportunity.

Motivation is a huge area, tied in closely with performance and performance management. Much has been researched and written about motivation, discussion of which exceeds the focus of this paper. In terms of learning and wisdom, however, it would be productive if individuals were motivated to learn and develop and to contribute their increasing abilities to the job and to share their knowledge with organisational counterparts. From the organisation’s perspective, it would be productive to identify what motivates individuals to learn, develop, and share, and to provide as richly rewarding an environment as possible. In particular, individuals should be recognised and rewarded for learning and sharing behaviours.

**23. Incentives.** Introduction of reflection as a *part of the way we do things here* may need to be accompanied by potent incentives to get people to begin practicing reflection and incorporating the discipline into *day to day* work. They will not know how to reflect, and may find it odd or confronting. It will not be a part of the normal routine, and may seem to come at great cost to typical measures of and attitudes regarding productivity. Employees will not have, yet, experienced the benefits of reflecting, and may need to be sold on its value. To be effective, reflection may need to be formally taught, and supported by the culture and its complex of organisational systems, practices, and values (Hays and Winter, 2004).

**24. Values.** Values permeate the entire model, as they both define and emerge from the organisation’s culture, itself. Values play a significant role in the wisdom system, both in terms of how it is enacted and how it is perceived. This is substantiated in much of the empirical and conceptual explorations of wisdom, where there is converging consensus concerning values characteristic of the wise individual. These include selflessness, or at least regard for others as

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well as self, compassion, objectivity and fairness, sound judgment, integrity, patience, tolerance, altruism, benevolence, thoughtfulness, and equanimity (Baltes and Staudinger, 2000, Birren and Fisher, 1990; Dreher, 2002; Goleman, 1998; Greenleaf, 1977; Kitchener and Brenner, 1990; Korac-Kakabase, Korac-Kakabase, and Kouzmin, 2001, Orwoll and Perlmutter, 1990).

Values influence emphasis on learning and adaptability. Presumably, those who think wisely would also want to create an environment in which everyone becomes more capable, effective, and mature (approaches wisdom). The wise individual does not “lord it over others,” but seeks to emancipate them. Here, the notions of Servant Leadership (Hays and Hughes, 2006) and Transformational Leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1990; Bierly, Kessler, and Christensen, 2000; Sarros and Santora, 2001) apply particularly well. Both concern advancing the organisation or community – a good cause – through advancing the people who work or live there.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

### Synopsis of Main Points

□ Wisdom is essentially doing the right thing. Wise organisations act judiciously and prudently in the appreciation of the fullness of context, respond to complex problems in contentious circumstances in a far-sighted and appropriate manner, and care about and prepare for a future that matters. To neglect the fullness of context and limit our horizons is unwise.

□ Organisational wisdom is a new application of an ancient concept, and may prove to be as valuable as it has proven to be uncommon. A topic whose time has come, organisational wisdom has largely been neglected in the management literature. As this paper and the dozens on which it is based from a wide range of disciplines suggest, however, wisdom is real, possible, and of vital importance.

□ Organisational wisdom is a viable, natural, and essential follow-on to organisational learning. Organisational learning has much to offer, but seems hard to achieve. What makes wisdom possible and essential may explain why organisational learning has been so elusive and what we need to do to become more effective at and get more out of organisational learning.

□ A new way of understanding organisational learning and how it operates is needed. Despite all we have discovered and tried, we do not seem to be able to practically, consistently, or effectively create organisations that learn and change. With the best intentions, hard work, great people, and deft maneuvers we fail to achieve important outcomes. Knowledge, experience, and effort fail us. We do things right, but don't do the right things. We may be intelligent, but not wise.

□ Driven by our system, we are likely to do what makes sense or is easiest at the moment, neglecting more complicated, far-reaching, or controversial issues and opting for the expedient, painless, or inexpensive route, thus, sacrificing the future. People and organisations do not learn or develop under these conditions. We are not serving as stewards to our communities and the larger environment.

□ Wisdom may be more relevant and necessary than ever before. Leaders today have an even greater challenge than did their predecessors throughout history. Things happen more quickly, opportunities are vast, and mistakes may have catastrophic, world-wide consequences.

□ The dynamic nature of organisational learning and wisdom can be modeled as a system, as presented in this paper. The model is complex, as befitting the system. Any model that attempts to capture and explain the dynamics of organisational learning must by definition be complex.

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Simpler models are easier to articulate and defend, but are limited in their ability to explain behaviour or to suggest interventions.

□ The wisdom system can operate as a virtuous cycle, ever-expanding and providing good outcomes for a more inclusive range of stakeholders. Wisdom is conscious, caring, committed, and capable. Wisdom is driven to improve self and circumstances for the greater good.

□ Wisdom is generally held to be a function of great intelligence, a wealth of experience, and conviction in values that include serving “the greater good.” These attributes are neither necessary nor sufficient to enable wise thought and action. Where wisdom exists, intelligence, knowledge, experience, and values are combined to consistently generate sound judgment and compassionate action, even in challenging, unique, and unpredictable situations.

□ The wise person is a reflective person. By extension, the wise organisation is a reflective one. To reflect is to consider the efficacy of choices and actions in given situations, while appreciating the larger and future context, and to promote development of more effective and far-sighted thought and behaviour.

□ Like people, organisations are not “born” wise; they develop wisdom over time. But the passage of time, even with accumulating experience, does not alone produce wisdom. Reflection is needed to convert experience into learning. The skill, opportunity, and predilection to reflect is *the* attribute that facilitates learning and the conduct of wise thought and action by integrating and exploiting the qualities of knowledge, experience, intelligence, context, and values.

□ Character traits of the wise person include compassion, empathy, altruism, sagacity, prudence, deliberation, and others, including the ability to see a situation from multiple

perspectives and to appreciate the consequences of actions on the future lives and welfare of those people and communities he or she serves.

□ These attributes of wisdom may sound lofty and irrelevant to the business and its objectives and practices. But perhaps expanding objectives to encompass contribution to the greater good (or at least a reduction in harm) is just what is needed to make our organisations friendlier and more meaningful places to work.

□ Wisdom has everything to do with organisational life and business. This is especially the case in an environment of increasing concern for sustainability, social responsibility, and corporate citizenship, all of which is occurring within a context of accelerating change and competition, blurring boundaries, and uncertainty.

□ The wise organisation is not exclusively one led by a minority of wise individuals, but is populated by people expected to be and working toward becoming wise themselves. Those who think wisely would also want to create an environment in which everyone becomes more capable, effective, self-aware, and mature (approaches wisdom). The wise individual does not “lord it over others,” but seeks to emancipate them.

□ Wise individuals are deeply self-aware: they know their strengths and their shortcomings; they are sensitive to their own needs, wants, and emotional states. The wise person knows the limits of his or her own capabilities, as well as the limits of knowledge and what is knowable. Such can also be said of the organisations and institutions in which we work and the communities in which we live.

□ Wisdom is more than applying knowledge and bringing experience to bear to solve problems. (Problem-solving can, itself, be a problem!) Wisdom transcends

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situational issues, typical problems, and known contexts. Wisdom is more universal than bound to a particular set of circumstances, including time and place. The wise person can generate useful solutions in novel circumstances, limited not by what he or she has learned through previous study or experience. The wise organisation contends with uncertainty and capitalises on changes in its larger environment.

□ The more inseparably we come to view ourselves and the world around us *as one*, the more likely we come to act more responsibly and altruistically. We become the stewards, not the masters. This aspect of responsibility and sense of ownership or stewardship for the system and the greater good is a defining feature of wisdom.

□ A core characteristic of the wise is a passion for knowledge, coupled with an acknowledgement of how little is known, which motivates learning. Add to this an on-going *mindfulness* of the learning process in which one is engaged, including one's own styles, tendencies, weaknesses, and learning objectives and requirements, and the result may be continuous learning and improvements in learning to learn.

□ Humility plays a major role in acquiring and demonstrating wisdom. When we can honestly admit we have much to learn, we may just have the chance to do so. This is the notion of emptiness: the metaphor of the empty vessel, for instance, highlights that much can flow into an empty vessel, while nothing much will enter one already full.

□ Wise individuals have the capacity to detach or “distance” themselves (in terms of satisfying their own egos and self-interests) from the problems confronting them and, thus, can operate objectively and with an open mind. The principle of non-attachment counsels not to hold on to things, including our beliefs. When we can “let go”, we can move on to new and more effective thoughts and behaviours.

□ The more we accept that situations are complex and involved, and the more equipped we are to deal with complexity, the better our decisions and solutions are likely to be. Systems thinking begins with the realisation that any problem or challenge occurs within and is an integral part of a system. The system is the context. Bringing systems thinking to problem-solving and decision-making concerns identifying and working with relationships and inter-dependencies amongst elements in a particular system.

□ The wise individual is able to see with clarity into complex situations, understand dynamic relationships concerning cause and effect, and make decisions or take actions that serve the interests of the common good. The wise organisation is populated with and led by people who collectively possess and collaboratively bring to bear these attributes.

□ Problems are not often as simple as we would like them to be; simple solutions for complex problems are few. A lot of our current problems and failed solutions can be explained by our predilection to oversimplify. Our typical response to problems is to attack the most painful symptom and to select a remedy that seems to most directly and immediately relieve the pain. As we often discover with palliatives, the headache may go away temporarily, but its cause does not.

□ The quick fix preference, “keep it simple” attitudes toward problem-solving, and tendency to assign problems to experts reduce symptoms of problems and is self-reinforcing; but undermines consideration of systemic issues, patterns of behaviour, and long-term consequences. Higher-order problem solving (double-loop learning) does not occur. Wider organisational capability is not built.

□ Biases, beliefs, and assumptions often operate at an unconscious level. If they remain unconscious and / or untested, then



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what we approach, how we approach it, and the outcomes we'll produce will all be impacted, *without our conscious thought*. For example, in assessing situations or problem-solving diagnosis, organisations are likely to find what they suspected existed, and they will be addressed in ways believed to be useful within the context of the organisation and acceptable by its members.

□ The more greatly we are aware of and accurately understand our biases, beliefs, and assumptions, and the more effectively we continually test out their validity, the more proficiently we will learn and the more effective our decisions and strategies will be.

□ Organisations can unintentionally preclude employee access to greater experience and opportunity by restricting participation in problem-solving and decision-making, as well as by limiting sophisticated training and development to senior staff. If an organisation wishes to increase its overall competency it is going to have to seriously consider its professional development, involvement, and empowerment strategies.

□ Opportunity encompasses access to and participation in the affairs of the organisation and the running of the business, crucial to developing fuller understanding of context, producing individual learning and development, and organisational capability-building.

□ Learning is not the same as knowledge or experience, and is more important than either. Knowledge and experience are based in the past, while learning is centred in the present and geared toward the future.

□ Knowledge influences both what is learned and how learning occurs. In some respects, the more we know, the more we can come to know (learn). This is because we can more easily integrate new material into more encompassing frameworks. Also, the more we have learned, the easier it may

be *to learn*. Over time, we hone our learning skills (e.g., we learn to reflect effectively).

□ Success can be a two-edged sword, cutting deeply when we are mistaken about what led to success. Failure can pose the same problem when we fail to recognise what complex of events and actions truly led to failing. Respectively, we fail to learn or we learn the wrong thing.

□ Without effective reflection, we might persist in certain behaviours and strategies believing they lead to success, when they may actually have little instrumentally to do with it. On the other hand, we might tend to discard one strategy after another to remediate problem performance, not really knowing what is causing us to fail. To mitigate this we need to learn to critically reflect.

□ Sufficient time and skill in reflecting will increase awareness of the affect of biases, beliefs, and assumptions on our thinking and behaviour. It is through reflecting that one “learns from experience.” That is, reflection amplifies the value of experience.

□ Achieving and sustaining organisational wisdom is an aim worth pursuing. Organisations that consistently do the right thing may not survive over the long haul. Should they prevail through adversity, however, it won't be through compromising their ethics or conducting business in ways that are exclusively self-serving. Should they fail, leaders and followers can take comfort in the knowledge that they performed to the best of their ability and did the greater good and welfare of the planet no disservice.

□ Organisations thinking and acting wisely will:

- ▶ Treat their employees, customers, and other stakeholders with respect.
- ▶ Identify and eliminate attitudes and practices that undermine a future that

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matters and are not in harmony with core values.

- ▶ Clarify, model, coach, recognise, and reward “doing the right thing.”
- ▶ Constantly seek and create opportunities to learn and evolve, and invest heavily in people development and building organisational capability.
- ▶ See themselves as vital parts of complex systems, understand the contexts in which they operate, and serve as committed stewards to their communities and the larger environment.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper presents a tentative model of organisational wisdom. The model identifies 24 elements comprising wisdom and their dynamic relationships. Existing models of the learning organisation (Shaw and Perkins, 1992; Reynolds and Ablett, 1998; Schwandt and Marquardt, 2000), fail to capture the essence of learning and interaction amongst key ingredients and processes. The configuration chosen here draws on and augments previous explicit models and depicts narrative attributes and descriptions in the learning organisation literature (Senge, 1990; Garvin, 1993; Ulrich, von Glinow, and Jick, 1993; Waldersee, 1997; Griffey, 1998; Shelton and Darling, 2003).

In constructing and describing the model and the relationships amongst its components, the author has drawn on a wide range of disciplines, touching upon extant literatures covering learning and Human Resource Development, motivation and reinforcement, teamwork and collaboration, culture, perception, systems thinking and complexity theory, reflection, and others, including wisdom itself. The elements or variables included in the model each represent major focus areas of study; no paper or model could do these respective disciplines justice. So, forbearance is sought from the many experts in these fields who could rightly censure and find lacking the treatment of the

various pieces of the model and the relationships amongst them that are certainly open to debate. Criticism, inquiry, and dialogue that consider the integrating model in its entirety would be most useful and is invited.

Some might find the model complicated; but it is necessarily so. Any attempt to capture and explain the dynamics of organisational learning must by definition be complex. Efforts to simplify or take “short cuts,” as might be the case when an organisation focuses on one or two elements of or strategies for organisational learning, may partially explain the difficulty organisations have experienced in trying to become more effective at learning.

The model seeks to build on the extensive organisational learning and knowledge management literature, and explain why, despite all that is known and prescribed, organisations fail to learn. Something important must be missing, the “glue” that would tie it all together. The inability to think systemically or to overcome problems with mental models (Senge, 1990) and other “learning disabilities” (Garvin, 1993), including teaching “smart people” to learn (Argyris, 1982; 1991) account for part of the reasons organisations fail to learn and adapt. But it is not from lack of “know how.” Organisations and the people who lead and manage them are smart, hard-working, and have the best of intentions. But they may not be wise. They may tend to do what makes sense at the moment, neglecting more complicated, far-reaching, or controversial issues and, thus, sacrificing the future.

Many of the elements included in the wisdom system already exist in most organisations. What is new in this proposed model is the way the elements are linked in terms of influence and inter-dependencies. This provides some of the glue. More adhesive and integrating are the philosophy and practice of wisdom, itself. It appears that where wisdom exists, intelligence,

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experience, and values are combined to consistently generate sound judgment and compassionate action (Baltes and Staudinger, 2000), even in challenging, unique, and unpredictable situations (Kitchener and Brenner, 1990).

At the heart of the wisdom model is learning. The wise person knows the limits of his or her own capabilities, as well as the limits of knowledge and what is knowable (Clayton and Birren, 1980; Meachum, 1990); thus is concerned with continuing to learn and “tapping” into the intelligence around him or her. Wise individuals tend to be open to others and new experiences. They talk with, not to others; more importantly, they listen. In Cleary’s (1989, p.45) translations of Zen writings from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, Lingyuan commented that:

*“Good leaders make the mind of the community their mind, and never let their minds indulge in private prejudices. They make the eyes and ears of the community their eyes and ears, and never let their eyes and ears be partial”.*

These ideas dovetail with emerging views on Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, 1998; Cooper and Sawaf, 1996; stewardship (Senge, 1990b; Spears, 2004) and Servant Leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; McGill and Slocum, 1998; Hays and Hughes, 2006); and transformational leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1990; Avolio, Walman, and Yammarino, 1991; Sarros and Santora, 2001). If you take the best of the attributes and ideals of the modern leader and blend them, you produce the wise individual or wisdom. Not only are such characteristics needed in those in formal positions of leadership, but in all of us. The wise organisation is not exclusively one led by a minority of wise individuals, but is populated by people expected to be and working toward becoming wise themselves. In many respects, this parallels trends in

empowerment and workplace democratisation (Stohl and Cheney, 2001; Collom, 2003). Leaders might provide the context and role model for wisdom, but it is everyone’s prerogative and obligation.

So, how to get at learning, this passage to wisdom? Wisdom is not knowledge, intelligence, values, or even, as commonly believed, experience, though it is a synergistic amalgam of them, fueled by learning. And, while curiosity or need may motivate learning, it is inspired and activated by reflection (Sharratt and Field, 1993; Chia and Morgan, 1996; O’Sullivan, 1999; Brown and Posner, 2001). One of the major contributions of the proposed model is the notion that reflection is a crucial feeder for learning and an elucidation of how this works. Not only has the impact of reflection on learning been convincingly demonstrated (Hays, 2004a), but reflection consistently appears as an attribute of the person who thinks and acts wisely (Birren and Fisher, 1990; Baltes and Staudinger, 1990; Kitchener and Brenner, 1990) and the capable strategic and transformational leader (Korac-Kakabadse, Korac-Kakabadse, and Kouszmin, 2001; Lichtenstein, 2000).

The attempt in this paper was to develop and present a defensible model of organisational learning and wisdom that makes both intuitive sense and incorporates accepted theory. The dynamic model of organisational wisdom is robust enough to provide guidance to practitioners, and to help explain problems being experienced. It tells them where sticking points might be, what might be causing them, and suggests what needs to be done about them. It provides a framework for understanding learning in organisations. This framework can be useful in designing and evaluating learning programs and strategies. Each organisation and situation will be different, and implementers will have to tailor the framework to their unique circumstances. There is no simple formula. But, the chances of achieving success are greatly enhanced when the factors

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entertained here have been sufficiently dealt with.

The dynamic model of organisational wisdom supplies ample substance for debate, and suggests many directions for further research. Focus for research might address the elements themselves: are they the right ones? –do they collectively explain the dynamics of organisation learning and wisdom, or are other variables more important? Do some of the variables carry more weight? –which are most potent and, thus, would be the levers for change and improvement? What important variables have been missed? –where do they fit and confound the current model? And, then, the relationships and interdependencies, themselves. Have the most important relationships been identified? Are the directions of influence accurate? What additional research substantiates or refutes the relationships as proposed?

Finally, given that the model is fairly complex, does it serve the practitioner? How does it hold up to the test of application? Managers tending to seek shortcuts or lower-cost alternatives will find little consolation and utility in the model. That said, any element could provide a starting point for intervention. An executive could do worse than to start with a renewed emphasis on learning and adaptability. Defining what is needed, assessing where the organisation is relative to that, and planning a way forward make a fine beginning to becoming a learning organisation.

Beginnings are about action. Action is a fundamental attribute of wisdom. Master

Gaoan says in the *True Record of Yunju* (as interpreted by Cleary, 1989, p.64):

*“Wisdom is like water—when unused it stagnates, when stagnant it does not circulate, and when it does not circulate, wisdom does not act”.*

More recently, Cavalieri and Fearon (1996), quoting Maturana and Varela, noted, “Knowing is effective action, that is, operating effectively in the domain of existence of living beings” (p. 13). Cavalieri and Fearon (1996) even define organisational knowledge “as the capacity for effective action, over time, that results from the collective knowing, experience, and reflection of all members of an organization” (p. 15). Further, they submit that “accumulations of organizational knowledge, over time, will eventually lead to organizational wisdom” (ibid.)

As beginnings are about action, wisdom is about beginnings. Wisdom is never about closure or convergence; it is about starting fresh and opening up: seeing the world through new eyes. It is not about certainty, but knowing how uncertain things are. It is not about knowing everything, but knowing how little is known. It is not about being perfect or precise, but being on the way there. As wisdom grows, curiosity, fascination, and imagination are retained; not lost, as they often are when we become smarter and better educated. So wisdom is the beginning that should be sought; not the end. It is within this context that the ideas advanced here should be critiqued.

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