



QUALITIES OF MIND: PATHWAYS TO WISDOM IN LEADERSHIP

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MASTERING PERSPECTIVE

At times we hear someone referred to as over-reacting, meaning they are reacting too strongly and emotionally to some smaller part of a larger situation. They lack a larger context that would allow them a more reasoned response, are considering the situation from a limited point of view, or are “too close” to the situation. Perhaps they are operating out of faulty motives. All of us are guilty at times of making these errors. If we happen to “gain perspective” our over-reactivity diminishes. Perspective is a prerequisite of wisdom, and perspective, has many different forms.

DISTANCE

Sometimes gaining perspective means *getting out of the situation*, and viewing it from a distance. The budget fight, or the argument over strategy, will look different when viewed from the moon than from inside your body sitting in your chair in the middle of the fight. Distance brings a wider and longer view and disconnects us emotionally, making us less reactive. Viewing situations from the distance of 100 years yields useful information, particularly about what is worthwhile, where to make stands, and what principles to use for guiding behavior. The perspective of distance allows us to yield when yielding is what is called for. At the same time viewing from a distance can keep us from behaving expediently, taking an easy short-run route while sacrificing the future. Distance in time and space allows us to test situations against our values and other *templates* for guiding our decisions and behavior.

When we are *in* situations our reactivity is at its greatest and our emotions strongly sway our opinions. If we have the ability to be *in* situations *and* gain distance while we're there, we are more likely to act wisely, with considered judgment and skillful means. In order to have wisdom we must master the paradox of being connected while being disconnected, of being present while having distance. Is it possible to remain engaged and connected while being dissociated in some manner? Can the ability to gain distance actually result in a greater degree of connection and compassion? The answer to both questions is yes. Consider, just as an example, how many times you have seen someone bolt from a situation because they were unable to gain distance or gain perspective, resulting in a complete disconnection. Given all the challenges life brings us, most people want some ways to experience life's shocks other than being over-reactive, overwhelmed, and overly vulnerable.

Distance, in space and time, is available to us when we're in a tough situation. Imagine yourself 85 years old, sitting in a chair on the patio, watching the sun go down. From that vantage consider the situation. Now, make sure you behave in it in a way that will make for a good memory at age 85.

OTHER POINTS OF VIEW

Probably all of us as children, at one time or another felt sorry for ourselves and were reminded by our parents of those in less fortunate circumstances. This was an attempt by our parents to put our unbearable suffering at the hands of wicked parents into perspective. The message: "Have a little wisdom, a little perspective."

When consulting with a client who is stuck in some organizational conflict, you can lead him (or her, as the case may be) quickly through a few different points of view, anywhere from his eight-year-old daughter's to the CEO's to Abraham Lincoln's. The point is to get him out of his own deeply embedded position and to gain the benefit of other points of view. The process is simple: "Imagine you are your daughter..." Allow him a few moments to get fully *in her shoes*, then, "How does she view what is happening? Imagine she can read your mind and emotions. What would make her proud of you?" Or, "Imagine the CEO is watching this conflict play out, burning precious time and resources. What does she want to have happen? What would she think of your motives and behavior?" Or, "What would Lincoln, the great forgiver and healer, tell you to do?" Within a few minutes the client may become unstuck from his singular point of view and be able to search more dispassionately for options. Sometimes, luckily, he will find a quick and brilliant insight that reframes everything.

Most of us hate to give up our point of view, which is why we can act so unwisely at times. The purpose of changing point of view is to gain different perspectives on the same situation, to view events and circumstances from other considerably different vantage points. Not only is the ability to shift one's point of view useful for gaining wisdom, but it is also a necessary skill for routine problem solving. Every puzzle, from a Rubik's Cube to chess to simply finding a way to get something done, yields its secrets by being considered in every possible manner. When asked to do so, most of us can look at a situation through another's eyes. The best problem solvers are quite adept at manipulating problems in their minds' eyes. Similarly, those who fluidly and effortlessly scan situations from multiple points of view tend to exercise better judgment based on much broader and more inclusive perspectives.

Some years ago while traveling, I happened to switch the TV on to a program in progress. The camera was on an elderly lady gathering her vegetables in her garden, and as she did so she was telling stories from her life. She began to recount memories about her father, who she represented as an especially sensitive man, and who always seemed to know just what to say or do. As a child, one day she was looking out the window watching her uncle and cousin bury their dog that had just died. She was extremely sad and upset by the dog's death and burial. Her father happened to come by and she expressed to him her sadness and confusion about life being painful in such a way. "Come with me, darling," he said. The gentle tone with which he must have spoken was conveyed some sixty or seventy years later through her own voice. He led her to a window on the other side of the house. "Look," he said, pointing to the now blooming rosebush they had planted in the spring. "You have to look out both windows," he said ever so gently. In that moment something about the fullness of life, with beginnings and endings, was communicated to her in a way that a long dissertation could never have done. Here we have wisdom in action, the power of perspective displayed with extraordinary touch and elegance.

PERSPECTIVE THROUGH CONTEXT: PURPOSES, CONCEPTS, PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

Choosing, and then deeply embedding, the right contextual elements makes it easier to sort out business issues and choices. These elements provide the basis for business perspective. The right elements, when done seriously and not as window dressing or corporate eyewash, provide a platform for the business. It's surprising how many businesses create long-term success by choosing a few simple elements and then delivering on them with passion and consistency.

Both Wal-Mart and Southwest Airlines became successful in already mature markets through an obsession with costs and value-for-low-price. Target did the same thing Wal-Mart did, but with a slightly higher target market. Nordstrom became successful and famous with a culture of exceptional customer service. Apple has successfully resurrected itself more than once through commitment to innovation and ease-of-use design. Berkshire-Hathaway has created success by avoiding problem deals, buying healthy companies with excellent prospects of long-term cash flows, and being financially sound above all else. In these companies, their core elements are the heart and soul of their business models—how they make money and stay successful.

Purposes, concepts, principles, and values provide context and therefore perspective, more easily allowing for wise business decisions. Business concepts such as Shareholder Value, Customer Focus, Lowest Price Provider, and Value Added are frames for testing decisions and plans, and efforts and results. Such business concepts serve as North Stars for orienting and considering every aspect of the business.

Similarly, company operating principles and values such as Culture Of Accountability, Teamwork In Service To Our Customers, or Rewarding Results Not Activity, serve as vantage points for viewing expenditures and initiatives, as well as guideposts for keeping the company culture on track. Themes articulated by the leader also serve this purpose, such as Andy Grove's "Only The Paranoid Survive." A clearly stated company purpose or vision provides a context and perspective for considering everything the company is doing or considering doing: "Does this help to make us **the** low cost airline?" Or, "Does this make it cheaper, faster, and easier for people to communicate with each other?" Johnson & Johnson continues its record of being trusted; when presented with ethical dilemmas the company chooses the safety and well-being of its customers. A mission such as "Dominance In Each Of Our Markets" provides test questions: "Does this decision, expenditure, or action contribute to our gaining and maintaining dominance in this market?"

"Business wisdom" by necessity includes that which reliably generates financial success. After all, businesses are first and foremost financial enterprises. Many times businesses drift, and find themselves engaged in activities and expenditures that do not build success. If businesses carefully choose their key purposes, concepts, principles, values, themes, and goals, and if they adhere carefully to those contextual elements, they can build a culture that predictably leads to success. The wise leader carefully chooses and reinforces those cultural artifacts that produce such success. A poor leader runs a business that has no such moorings or points of focus.

TRANSCENDING POSITION AND MOTIVE

Motive so much derives from and determines perspective that we can almost say that it is perspective. They are completely intertwined: “Where you sit is where you stand.” If you sit just in yourself, you tend to stand just for yourself. If your seat is in union or management you tend to stand just for union or management. If you are an Israeli or Palestinian you might stand just for Israel or Palestine. Where you stand defines an imaginary circle, with you and yours on the inside and everyone and everything else on the outside. We all have many such imaginary but very real boundaries around us that we use to police our notion of insiders and outsiders. In many people these boundaries are hard and fast, and the tendency is to be quite blind and reactive about them. In those of rare wisdom, while these boundaries exist, they are known, admitted, and transcended when necessary.

Wise leaders are able to imagine “sitting and standing” elsewhere, and even more important are able to occupy higher ground above all the various positions, searching for common or mutually beneficial solutions. When such solutions are not possible, this higher ground provides at least the opportunity for “the wisdom of Solomon”, the difficult process of dispensing pain and benefit. The ability to “sit and stand” in all positions, and to occupy the ground above all the positions, is a prerequisite for effective facilitation and diplomacy. Similarly, being capable of seeing the entire field from above, and to occupy any of the competing positions, are critical skills in negotiation and mediation. Those who aspire to be effective facilitative-style leaders will need to master these sorts of skills, perspectives, and abilities.

IMAGINATION AND POSSIBILITY

A particularly useful vantage point, and the source of our creativity and the progress that follows, is *that which does not exist but could*. We compare what *is* with what *might* or *could be*. This is the perspective of possibility, and we use our imagination to gain such perspective. Possibility continually challenges our cynical belief that we are stuck with things as they are. For a business, without belief in possibility, there is little hope for enduring success; for an individual, without belief in possibility, there is little hope for a happy and productive life. It is belief in possibility that allows us to transcend fate. The most forward-looking people and businesses spend much of each day imagining and building a new reality better than the present one. In conflicted situations, imagination can rescue us from a stuck, pinched, crabbed view of reality. “Let’s imagine a happy outcome. What would it be?”

Similarly, entrepreneurship is the successful imagination of a new product, service, or innovation. As you read this article people are dreaming up new products and services that someday you will use. Who knows, perhaps some are making breakthroughs that will save your life! This is wonderful for you as a consumer, but all those entrepreneurial efforts are threats to existing businesses. Wise leaders figure out how to destroy their own businesses, through imagination and innovation, before someone else does. Wise leaders use the prospect of a *possible future* to organize and focus the company’s people and resources for long-term success.

Possibility is the life-blood of every business. It certainly was when the business was conceived and launched, and will be again some day when it comes under threat. Operating in this realm of possibility, some businesses will produce products that may be considered destructive (cigarettes?); some will produce products that are trivial (tourist trinkets?); some will produce

products of such great value that literally every person will want them (vaccines?). Regardless, a business cannot endure for long if it fails to continually re-invent itself, its products, and its services. Every business must continually imagine new ways of serving needs and desires, new ways to enhance the lives of customers as defined and judged by those customers.

Every leader knows that one of the biggest barriers he or she faces, in continually leading such change, are the human habits of complacency, rigidity, and cynicism, and in particular, people's reluctance to hitch their stars to a search for what is possible versus what used to be and is. It is this perspective of possibility that leaders must engender in their people, because it is these folks who must do the hard work of closing the gap between what is and what can be imagined. The best leaders seem to know how to evoke this world of possibility, and gain people's commitment to actualizing imagined possibilities.