

The Wise Leader in a Premodern Organizational Context

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In its premodern form, there is a widely-present leadership style that is founded on WISDOM. A person is assigned leadership in a family, clan, group or organization because this person has more experience than anyone else or because this person possesses some fundamental and distinctive knowledge either because this competency is inherited or because it have been taught to the wise leader (usually as a result of this person's inherited wealth or great promise as a young person).

Alexander the Great is certainly one of the vivid personifications of this premodern mode of leadership. Alexander was “born into greatness.” His father had been king of Macedonia and, even more importantly, Alexander displayed great potential as a young man—physically and intellectually. Perhaps most importantly, Alexander was the only pupil of one of the legendary teachers of all times: Aristotle. Thus, at a young age, Alexander was identified as a wise leader (we will also see that he is identified, as well, as a brave leader and as a leader of vision). While most WISE leaders in premodern societies don't arrive at their leadership position until accumulating many years of experience and expertise, Alexander was able to assume a leadership role, based on wisdom, at a very early age, in large part because of not only his inheritance (father was king) and his early display of competence, but also because of his credentials as a pupil of Aristotle.

Educated for Leadership

We find that this accumulation of prestigious credentials exists not only in the ancient world of Alexander, but also in contemporary societies. Men (and women) who have graduated from such

universities as Harvard, Yale or Stanford are assumed to be not only prepared for leadership but also, in some way, to be deserving of leadership. They have studied hard in high school (supposedly), which enabled them to be selected to a highly competitive college or university. We see this respect (even “reverence”) for a prestigious education in the recent selection of American presidents. They have all graduated (undergraduate or graduate school) from either Harvard or Yale (Clinton, both Bushes, Obama).

The irony is that this prestigious education has rarely been directly devoted to the acquisition of leadership skills—usually because the assumption is made that leadership can’t be taught. Only character, discipline, and broad-based knowledge can (perhaps) be taught or inculcated. This is often identified as a “liberal arts” education or, in previous times, as the form of education that was becoming to a “gentleman” or “gentlewoman.” It is interesting to note that all liberal arts education up until the start of the 19th Century in the United States was devoted to such topics as moral philosophy, literature, rhetoric and theology. Science was not taught in an American college (or university) until West Point began offering courses in this “ungentlemanly” area of knowledge in the early 1800s.

Of course, there were no courses to be taught in management, finance, marketing or any related area during the 19th Century. These tasks were not to be handled by true leaders. They were to be engaged by hired hands. Courses in management were not even taught in American colleges and universities until the 20th Century. In fact, management theory and education is exclusively a product of the 20th Century and is one of the major areas of growth in American higher education.

The Leadership of Experience

Even when a man or woman is not formally educated and prepared to become a leader, he or she may attain this status as a result of substantial experience in the field or organization. Harold has been selling real estate for 30 years. He knows the market in this city better than anyone. He certainly deserves to be the new managing director of this agency. Susan opened this organic food store twenty years ago – long before “green” became “golden.” She is not only the owner of this store, she is also the undisputed leader of this store. Everyone turns to her for advice and she

makes all of the key decisions regarding new products, marketing and displays—despite the fact that she only comes to the store two days a week (having grown a little weary of the daily drag of operating the store). Richard has been a farmer for many years. His father and mother owned a farm and Richard grew up feeding chickens, operating and repairing farm equipment, and listening every morning to the farm reports on the local radio station. He is now working for a large agri-business operation—yet he is still turned to for advice. Through his stories and sage observations Richard still holds the attention and respect of men and women much younger than himself. He is an informal leader of the organization, even if many other people occupy positions of management at higher levels in his organization.

What kind of experience seems to be important? We tend to value both breadth and depth of experience. We look for wisdom in someone who has “seen it all”—meaning that he or she has not remained in one place for many years, doing only one thing repeatedly. Twenty years of experience is not assigned much validity if this person has learned everything in one year and simply repetitively enacted this year of experience for twenty years. We also tend to look for wisdom among those who can reflect back on and articulate their rich experiences. They are often brilliant story-tellers, even if they usually remain rather quiet (unless asked to provide advice or guidance). These men and women often are natural (and informally-designated) mentors. They enjoy teaching those who are younger or less experienced. They take great delight in seeing other people succeed as a result of sharing their expertise and tend to view these younger or less experienced people as protégés rather than rivals. We talk in psychology about the shift in attention from *personal success* (one’s own accomplishments) to a sense of *collective significance* (the accomplishments of other people or one’s family, group or society).

The Challenges of Premodern Wise Leadership

This positive and perhaps overly optimistic portrait of the wise leader needs to be moderated—for the wise leader is not always so gracious and delighted with the transition of leadership to the next generation. The premodern leader can at times be quite resistant to this transition and may be threatened by the acquisition of new knowledge and additional experiences by younger men and women. This threat and resistance is often couched in ambivalence. The wise leader teaches and encourages education, yet doesn’t want the new kid on the block to become too smart or too

experienced. I have worked with many young men and women from Asia who come to the United States to obtain a Masters Degree in Management. Their father (and presumably their mother) fully supports them in obtaining this education. They provide the funds to support this advanced education and enable their son or daughter to take time off from their life in Asia in order to study in the United States. Yet, when these young men and women return home, freshly “educated” in the new models of management, finance and marketing, they often bump up against a surprisingly resistant parent. The outcry of frustration is common (though usually softly spoken by my Asian students): “Why did my father [mother] pay for this education if he [she] doesn’t want me to use it!!” I now suggest strategies whereby they “ease in” their suggestions for change and improvement. They look with “appreciation” on the practices of their father or mother that are fully aligned with contemporary management practices.

Even when the wise leader is fully open to the transition in leadership, there is often a hesitation on the part of other members of the organization to acknowledge, let alone actively support, this transition. They have relied for many years on the wisdom of the “old” leader and do not yet trust the competence of the new leader—he or she is not yet “tested” as to the practicality of their wisdom. Do we dare risk relying on this person’s experience, when we have the wise, old leader to guide us? Ironically, even when the knowledge and expertise of the old leader is now “out-of-date” – which is very common in our technologically-driving, postmodern world—there is still a yearning for that which is known and reliable. The old leader either no longer has an agenda to press on the organization or has an agenda that is widely acknowledged and which other members of the organization can factor in when taking into account the advise or guidance offered by the old leader. Wisdom, in other words, is based not just on the experience and expertise of the wise leader; it also is based on the experience of those who follow this leader: the followers are “wise” about the leader’s “wisdom.”

The challenge for this form of leadership can thus be summed up in two words: **SUCCESSION PLANNING**. When a wise leader is playing a key role in an organization, then plans must begin very early regarding the preparation of other men and women to assume the wise old leader’s role. This involves not just the mentoring of the new leader(s) by the old leader, but also the building of formal programs that prepare the organization for this transition in leadership. In

some instances, these formal programs involve placing a new person in an interim leadership role (alongside the old leader); in other instances, it means the use of rituals and rites regarding the succession; in yet other instances, it means sending the new leader off for additional training or education. With regard to this third option, I have always been impressed with the policy of many religious orders (particularly orders of Catholic nuns) to send someone who is about to assume a position of leadership to an executive leadership program (at Harvard, Yale or a comparable institution). This provides the new leader with an opportunity not only to step away from their own organization to gain a fresh perspective, but also to return to their home organization with new credibility (like Alexander the Great) and with reassuring breadth and depth of “wisdom.”

We are still, in many ways, living in premodern organizations and living in the back of our minds and hearts in a world that yearns for men and women of wisdom. It is important—perhaps essential—that we recognize this premodern reality and acknowledge this premodern yearning for a form of leadership that is based on wisdom.