

Part I

Introduction

Introduction

Robert J. Blomme and Bertine van Hoof

1.1 Introduction

Many of the current ideas on leadership and management are grounded in theories that find their origins in ancient and recent philosophical and religious sources. The stories and images stemming from these traditions have become firmly embedded in our conscious and our subconscious mind and, we believe, are also exerting a clear influence on modern corporate culture, irrespective of whether people are religious or not. We hope that by returning to the source and the source texts we can deepen the understanding of certain important ideas and notions which affect our present thinking. In this book we go back in history to answer the question: How can one act wisely in the spirit of the present age?

This book is not about religion. It is about what we can learn from the wisdom we have inherited from religious and philosophical traditions. We present a diversity of perspectives on how wisdom from the ancient traditions can be translated into management and business practices. However, at the same time, it seems that some business and management practices may be far too down to earth for the sophisticated ideas and notions of the wisdom traditions discussed here. It is not always easy to narrow, far less close the gap between insights and notions from universal and abstract wisdom traditions on the one hand, and the daily practice of management and business on the other. We have, nevertheless, attempted to do exactly this by including in this book the thoughts of practitioners and representatives of wisdom traditions as well as those of scholars. We interviewed five leaders from business, politics and wisdom traditions in order to gain insight into the ways in which their background has influenced their attitudes and behavior. In this chapter we discuss the message this book might bring and how it can be used to help managers and other professionals.

1.2 Wisdom traditions

We have chosen to speak of wisdom traditions rather than religions. Quoting his teacher, Friedman (1992) defines religion as ‘the total response of the total being to what is experienced as ultimate reality’ (p. 3). This definition of religion extends farther than doctrines as expressed through, for example, theology, metaphysics, creed and myth, and farther than practice as expressed through, for example, rituals, masses and prayers (Friedman, 1992). It also stretches beyond the physical manifestations in the form of communities, such as congregations, brotherhoods and sects which follow a religious path and partake in worship. In the words of Friedman (p. 4), ‘Religion is a path that walks. Religion is a commitment. Religion is one’s basic response to whether or not one calls oneself religious and whether or not one affirms the existence of God.’ According to Friedman, the examination of a religion requires a conceptual clarification, without detracting from the encounter between Man and God or other deities, and without doing injustice to how people worship and how they experience this encounter. If we want to explore wisdom derived from religions we have to take these caveats into account.

In this book we do not focus specifically on the relationship between Man and the Divine in our exploration of wisdom. As stated, we do not speak of religions, but of wisdom traditions. We endorse Sternberg and Jordan’s concept of wisdom (2005, p. 3) and define wisdom traditions as the cultural outcomes, including religion, philosophies, myths, songs and written texts, which all people, primitive or civilized, have produced to pass down their knowledge to future generations. In our examination of wisdom we are especially interested in how these cultural outcomes influence the perceptions and behavior in the daily life of people who follow a religion and how they can be used for the benefit of management and business practices. One could say that we apply a ‘secular’ approach, given that we believe that the term ‘wisdom tradition’ captures what we want to examine far more succinctly than ‘religion.’ Wisdom tradition is a broad concept that encompasses not only religious movements but also secular philosophies which have influenced people’s thoughts and lifestyles through the ages. Neither the Buddha nor Confucius nor Socrates nor Plato base their teachings on a divine authority (Black, 2005), so branches of Western and Eastern philosophy could also be placed under the umbrella of wisdom traditions.

According to Jaspers (1949), the five main religions, as well as Eastern philosophy – including Confucianism and Taoism – and Western philosophy, originated in the ‘axial’ period, which lasted from 800 till 200 BCE. It was during this period that the foundations were laid for present-day civilizations and people went in search of moral truths to answer

deep, burning questions about life and its meaning, and find ways in which they could live and work together in peace and prosperity. These moral truths provided a basic structure in which civilizations and societies could emerge. The concept of the axial period has been further developed by theologians and religious thinkers (cf. Armstrong, 2005). Jaspers' theory has, however, been questioned by historians (cf. Black, 2008). There is general agreement that there are moments in history when breakthroughs in thinking have conditioned the way people think, live and behave for a very long time (Black, 2008). Black argues that sometimes, during periods of breakthrough, new ideas and attitudes are integrated into a long-standing tradition while leaving the good and usable aspects of that tradition intact. Examples of this can be found in Confucius and the Hebrew prophets. On the other hand, new ideas and attitudes can be introduced which contest the tradition and call for change. Examples of this can be found in the teachings of the Buddha, who radically reinterpreted the idea of Karma, and in Socrates, who exhorted us to rely on our own mind and experience, and not be swayed by current trends in thinking. The success achieved by new ideas as the harbinger of renewal and change in leading traditions is measured by the extent and resilience of their impact on social, political, religious and ethical structures in a civilization or society. In a similar vein, Black further claims that the Age of Enlightenment was a small axial period which changed our perception of Man (humanism) and challenged us to rationalize and manipulate the world around us (science).

In short, axial periods, or periods of breakthrough, are characterized by the introduction of new ideas and attitudes which push forward the existing boundaries and clear the way for new traditions. So, besides the five main religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism) we can add Confucianism, Taoism and Humanism to our list of wisdom traditions since they have influenced the lives and work of swathes of the world population down the ages. We will use these eight wisdom traditions in our examination but we will also look at the ideas of offshoots, such as Sufism.

1.3 Wisdom

What relevance does wisdom – more specifically wisdom from wisdom traditions – hold for managers and businesspeople? Man has pursued wisdom since time immemorial. Moberg (2006) has emphasized Man's natural curiosity in the search for wisdom. In Aristotelian fashion, Moberg argues that wisdom can be compared with a two-sided coin. One side holds

the answers to the profound mysteries of life, while the other holds the answers to the everyday judgments and decisions we have to make. The latter is often described as practical wisdom (Schwartz, 2011; Chandler, 2013; Marker, 2013). Humans are also spiritual beings (Fry, 2003), looking for ‘wise’ ideas on how to cope with daily problems. This emergent need for ‘wise’ ideas has been triggered by the tendency of management and behavioral scientists to focus on the development of instruments and to search for causality in human behavior (Pyzczynski et al., 2004). Meantime, human beings grapple, consciously or unconsciously, with questions about themselves and about life (Blomme & Bornebroek-Te Lintelo, 2012). In the process they might look for notions that refer to their own situation as workers in an organizational context, and their efforts to derive meaning from what they do. Moberg (2006) contends that people who work in organizations grapple with a whole stack of issues and are often confronted with distorted information and ambiguities, moral dilemmas, execution binds and ethical decision-making. All of this makes organizations and the surrounding environments complex places, where instrumental solutions are hardly ever the answer (Blomme & Bornebroek Te Lintelo, 2012). Often, this complexity entails not only dilemmas in judgment and decision-making but also questions regarding the significance and meaning of one’s role, one’s actions and one’s relationship with colleagues and the organization at large. These are important topics in the wisdom traditions discussed in this book.

Wisdom and management practices are not topics that are frequently discussed together (Moberg, 2006). When they are, the perspective is usually philosophical or psychological (Sternberg & Jordan, 2005; Moberg, 2006). Theories on how notions and ideas from wisdom traditions can contribute to management practice are thin on the ground and most of the scholarly and management publications address wisdom in relation to the concept of leadership (cf. Kriger & Seng, 2005; Yang, 2011; Ben-Hur & Jonsen, 2012; Gottlieb, 2012; Kaipa & Radjou, 2013; Van Hoof & Blomme, 2013). One important reason for this omission is that wisdom traditions are often associated with dogmas and enduring convictions. However, the ideas and notions from wisdom traditions can themselves be a highly inspirational and powerful force when these dogmas and convictions are omitted. When we flesh out the texts of these wisdom traditions and transpose them to a modern setting, they can cause shifts in perspective and serve as input for further reflection. The human being who is grappling with life and work may find that these wisdom traditions can offer him insight into the subtle changes taking place in his outer and inner world, and help him to develop self-

awareness so that he can help others to address their own grappings (cf. Kriger & Seng, 2005).

1.4 Dimensions of wisdom

An all-important question is: How do we make the concept of wisdom more accessible to managers and business professionals? What relevance does the concept of wisdom hold for the managers and professionals who are grappling with problems and ambiguities on a daily basis?

Scholars have discussed at length what the dimensions of wisdom actually entail. Moberg (2006) refers to the concept of wise responses to the surrounding environment, which is related to the psychological components of wisdom and includes knowledge, thinking, emotions and motivation. Other authors also refer to the psychological condition of a wise attitude and the corresponding behavior (cf. Kriger & Seng, 2005; Izak, 2013). These psychological conditions point to a certain state of mind that makes people act wisely. Hence, we would argue that, as a first dimension, wisdom is a competence. One important aspect of a competence is whether it can translate ideas or notions into practice and into action. In the psychology of learning this process is commonly known as ‘transfer’ (Blomme, 2003). An important condition for transfer is an ability and willingness to put knowledge and wisdom into practice. Openness to the surrounding environment, unclouded by emotions or moods, is another important condition. However, in interpreting the surrounding environment, the willingness to assume nothing and to subject to scrutiny everything that is true in the perspectives of the majority and make one’s own interpretation is no less important in order to maintain an objective mindset and vision (Black, 2008). We might claim that the willingness and motivation to develop and maintain such a state of mind has associations with the concept of freedom. Hence, putting wisdom into practice calls for a right state of mind.

The second dimension is leadership – not only leadership of others but also leadership from within. Kriger and Seng (2005) note that a ‘wise’ leader notices subtle changes in his outer and his inner world. By reflecting upon these and by being morally disposed to prevent harm to the social environment, a leader can arrive at ‘wise’ leadership. Acting in an unpredictable and chaotic world (Blomme 2012; Intezari & Pauleen, 2014), awash with ambiguities and inadequate and distorted information (Moberg, 2006) calls for skillful maneuvering and cautious behavior. When they discharge their responsibilities for the well-

being of the people they lead, leaders must act cautiously in trying to understand the changes in the environment (Yang, 2011) and in themselves (Kriger & Seng, 2005). Wise leadership is often reflected in its relational accomplishments (Yang, 2011). McNamee (1998) stresses the importance of the role of the leader in dialogues which generate wisdom through a process of interaction. This also holds for the leader's role in the establishment and maintenance of communities aimed at sharing and collective activities. Hence, putting wisdom into practice calls for 'wise' leadership.

The third dimension concerns the question of how we can support engagement and innovation in others and ourselves. How do we stay engaged and innovative as managers and professionals? Here, we might hark back to the state of mind listed as the first dimension. However, here we also take a closer look at our own grappling behavior in organizations. Engagement does much more than influence the corporate performance; it is a much broader concept that also addresses the possibilities for individuals to decide when and where to translate their cognitive, affective and physical energy into activities (Kahn, 1990; Rich et al., 2010). Although, on the one hand, work engagement may seem specific to the individual (one either does or does not have a positive attitude to life), various studies have shown that it is positively influenced by personal and external resources (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007; Xanthopoulou et al., 2008; Rich et al., 2010). When it comes to state of mind, one may suggest that the individual state of mind is an important precondition for engagement. Having already defined state of mind as the first dimension, what we want to emphasize here is that we can learn lessons from wisdom traditions that will enable us to use external resources to enhance engagement and thus increase creativity and innovation. Wisdom traditions have demonstrated beyond doubt that their value patterns have retained their influence over time; but this could be attributable, to some extent, to an inbuilt flexibility and an ability to adapt to the spirit of the time. Hence, wisdom traditions may be sources of creativity and inspire people to make optimal use of external conditions to become engaged and innovative. Consequently, putting wisdom into practice calls for the right state of mind, and an effective use of external resources, to become engaged, creative and innovative.

For the fourth dimension, we want to stress the importance of communities. Every wisdom tradition has a strong moral dimension, which includes the prevention and alleviation of human suffering and a debt to the community to which one belongs. The insights of wisdom traditions give directions on how to work and live together in a setting where people can develop and flourish. Hence, in business also, this idea, in which communal sharing and

significance are prevalent, can enhance mutual trust and collaboration (Sims & Sauser, 2013). This seems to be in line with the seminal work of Fiske (1992) and Blomme, Van der Veen and Venupogal (in progress), who argue that community building and sharing increase trust and reduce bureaucracy. The preconception that you must take care of the members of your community so that they can take care of you has a moral dimension. The maintenance of communities is therefore an important condition for trust, learning, creation and innovation. Also, although leaders have a moral responsibility toward the community members, they should be aware that it is the community who brings about the conditions for ‘wise leadership,’ including legitimacy and obedience. Hence, putting wisdom into practice calls for the building and maintenance of communities.

As the last dimension, we want to address the subject of empathy and sensitivity to different cultures. We must realize that we are consciously or subconsciously influenced by wisdom traditions that uphold similar values and perspectives to our own. Having been raised with certain preconceptions, we might find people from another wisdom tradition strange and incomprehensible. In that sense, we might refer to a right state of mind in which we are open to cultures with which we are not familiar. Often the differences between the wisdom traditions of the West and the East are exaggerated. This attitude fails to do justice to the rich kaleidoscope of the different wisdom traditions which emerged in different places and in different periods with specific economic, social and societal questions that were in need of answers. There are big differences between wisdom traditions, especially between those founded in Western Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia-Pacific and India, which invite misinterpretations and complicate collaboration and business. Spanning bridges between the various regions calls for ‘wise’ behavior with strong elements of cautiousness and sensitivity. In sum, putting wisdom into practice calls for a willingness to associate with people raised in another wisdom tradition and insight into other cultures.

1.5 How the book is organized

This book consists of five parts excluding the Introduction and Final Thoughts part. These five parts reflect the five dimensions of wisdom discussed in this chapter.

With a right state of mind

The theme of the first part is a ‘wise state of mind,’ which is discussed first by *Maarten Verkerk* and *Jan Hoogland* from the perspective of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. The authors reflect on the relativity of status, power, materialism and life itself. Then, *Ōtani Tetsuō Roshi* and *Ingrid Shugetsu Appels* reflect on the wise state of mind, using the philosophy and insights of Dōgen Zenji, a Zen Buddhist master who lived in Japan in the thirteenth century. They also discuss the importance of rituals and the connections that managers should have with everything they do. From a Humanistic point of view, *Claus Dierksmeier* and *Katherina Hoegl* will then build up arguments for a conceptualization of global ethics for globalized business. The authors stress that we should approach business from a diachronically as well as synchronically recognized global ethic, not a quantitative Minus of managerial liberty, but a qualitative Bonum of corporate and economic freedom. Louis Aartman uses the thoughts and ideas of Baruch de Spinoza for integration into his own personal leadership. Finally, we present an interview with *Gert van Dijk*, a Buddhist practitioner and ethicist, about his state of mind when he has to assess and decide in contexts where health, illness and death are important themes.

Leadership from within

This part examines how leadership can bring about wisdom in organizations. *Eleftheria Egel* begins by discussing the theme of leadership from an Islamic perspective. She focuses on the role of stewardship, justice and servanthood in leadership, and emphasizes the importance of learning within communities. She also discusses important roles for leaders as designers, teachers and stewards. Inspired by an ancient text from the Old Testament book of Psalms, *Ulrica van Panhuys* introduces the concept of leadership from the role of a shepherd. She develops a leadership model entitled ‘PASTEUR’ in which she builds a bridge between leadership within and leadership of others. *Karin Jironet* reflects on governance and leadership with insights from Sufism and describes how leadership can be fostered and developed. This section concludes with an interview with *Doekle Terpstra*, Chairman of Inholland University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands, who elaborates on how the Christian tradition that he grew up in has influenced his style of leadership.

Engagement and innovation

The third part includes a variety of perspectives on how people may become engaged and innovative in practice while grappling with ambiguities and pursuing the quest for meaning in work. First, *Grace Yu* uses the insights of Confucius to define an environment in which creativity and innovation unfold. She discusses the concepts of *Wu wei er zhi* and *qie qie si si, yi yi ru ye* as important preconditions for a creative organization. *Robert Blomme* then discusses the insights of Albert Camus as a vehicle for dealing with a world which is meaningless and absurd. He elaborates on the concepts of creation and solidarity as part of a moral disposition to become engaged and innovative in an absurd world. *Amir Mehrani* reflects on what the poems of Rumi can mean for the concept of appreciative inquiry into the building of 'wise' organizations. This part concludes with an interview with *Jeff Smulyan*, a well-known captain of industry and entrepreneur, who explains how his Jewish background helped to shape his vision of engagement and innovation within organizations.

Community, learning and development

This part looks at the important role played by communities in the development of wisdom through interaction and learning. First, *Josh Plaskoff* discusses insights from Judaism in relation to communities and learning. He highlights the importance of covenants and the role of the community in learning. *Samita Bhattacharjee* then discusses how Tata encourages and stimulates learning and development from a Hindu perspective. *Kemi Ogunyemi* follows with a description of how learning and development are stimulated in an African context and explores the ethical dimension of doing business. This part concludes with an interview with *Johannes Witteveen*, former Dutch Minister of Finance and former CEO of the IMF. He elaborates on how people should focus on learning and development.

Cross-cultural perspectives on management

Here we explore the differences between cultures stemming from different wisdom traditions, and look at how we can bridge the gap toward a fruitful collaboration and business relationship. First, *Huibert de Man* and *Helen Haijing de Haan* discuss the issue of Chinese management: Does it exist or not? They also elaborate on how Confucianism and Taoism have influenced the way Chinese people perceive and conduct business and the possible lessons for 'Western' management. *Paul van der Velde* traces how cultures with a Buddhist background perceive change processes and business, and explains the key points of

Buddhism, including the concept of Karma, which affects attitude and behavior. *Jianhong Zhang* and *Chaohong Zhou* discuss the Chinese culture from the perspective of Yin and Yang, with the aim of showing people with a Western background that the foundations of Chinese culture are different from those in most Western cultures. *Ramnath Narayanswamy* takes a Hindu perspective on how to avoid becoming caught up in a web of materialism and falling prey to passion, anger and greed. All of this refers to a state of mind in which managers can be open to themselves and the surrounding world. He ends by addressing the differences between the Indian culture and the culture in most Western countries. Finally, *Sally Hindham* discusses in her interview how she leads an organization by applying insights from her Quaker background.

1.6 Conclusion

We hope that other authors will also discover the richness of wisdom traditions and the ancient texts that have inspired people through the ages. But nowadays there are also thinkers who are writing about ideas and notions that can become a source of wisdom and inspiration for management and business. We believe that these five sections as a whole and the individual chapters will provide the reader with some knowledge on how to use insights and notions from different wisdom traditions to (1) develop a state of mind in which one can transfer wisdom to management and practice, (2) develop communities in which trust, learning and innovation are emphasized, (3) engage and collaborate with other people to change grappling behavior into creativity and innovation, (4) conduct leadership which is based on ethical principles and introspection, and (5) understand people from other cultures and build bridges for communal sharing and collaboration. To start this book, Chapter 2 is an interview with *Lama Yeshe Sangmo*, who gives an interesting perspective on what wisdom can be and mean for people.

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