



Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/orgdyn



Coaching for Leadership Wisdom

Elizabeth King, Kate Norbury, David Rooney

INTRODUCTION

In both common usage and the language of leadership, the concept of wisdom embodies trustworthy decisions and ethical judgements. These mindsets lead to the type of actions we expect of positive leaders, actions which are notably absent when we observe the phenomenon of ‘dark’ or destructive leadership.

It is easy to assume that wisdom is readily recognized and enacted. However, a little self-reflection highlights that leading wisely, like living wisely, is a complex way of behaving, and is a complex capability to develop. We argue here that coaching methodologies, due to their focus on the ‘end game’, can help people develop their desired outcomes, including wisdom; and we draw on the movie, *Life of a King*, to illustrate the point.

The evidence of large-scale suffering resulting from foolish, toxic or destructive leadership in the corporate world has been established in scholarly studies. It is, however, easier to identify and analyze the characteristics of foolish leadership in the political sphere where it has high visibility. One prominent scholar of wisdom, Robert Sternberg, has done so by highlighting the potential for global-scale destruction through failures of wisdom. He cites nuclear weapons, climate denial and disaster, increasing levels of poverty and income disparity, and the inability of modern medicine to treat new viruses as examples of wisdom failures. He contends that these issues result from heedless political leaders who make ill-informed decisions. Currently, the global Covid-19 crisis has displayed uneven and unwise leadership in many countries, highlighting chaotic decision-making and poor judgement.

Our specific purpose here, is to effect change in the less visible but equally important corporate environment. The development of wisdom in organizational leaders will prevent unnecessary suffering not only for the individuals within or directly linked to that organization, but for all those who may be impacted by its products, services, responsibilities or missteps. In this article, we set a foundation for leader coaching aimed towards future happiness and well-being in the world.

Towards that aim, we have distilled current thinking on how to help leaders and their coaches co-create systems and relationships to enact greater wisdom. We have done so from the perspective of our own work experience as practitioners and researchers, to support the translation of wisdom theory to coaching practice.

Specifically, we have outlined models that capture key aspects of the topic together with tools that are derived from those models, providing the coach with an evidence-based approach to planning and reflecting on strategies to develop wisdom.

The models distil research understandings about:

- The observed characteristics of wise leaders (McKenna et al. 2005);
- A framework that repurposes those characteristics as a guide for the coach working with a coachee on the goal of developing wisdom. We call it the Compass Coaching model as it helps keep the coaching interaction on a clear course to wisdom;
- The desired competencies of both wise individuals and organizations, recognizing that wise decision-making and actions are bound up in context, systems and relationships (King and Badham 2018);
- Development activities (practices) that are known to be effective in increasing wisdom (Sternberg, 2004).

In addition, to help us refresh our understanding of some common coaching behaviors in practice, we have nominated the movie *Life of a King* where we see a coach reflecting on his own life experience, what he learned from it, and the way he uses that life experience to help young people change their own lives. We recommend that readers/coaches refer to this movie as they reflect on their own work.

Why Focus on Coaching for Wisdom at Work?

Traditional leadership education tends to focus on the development of knowledge and skills. However, the processing of

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2020.100815>

0090-2616/© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Inc. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Please cite this article in press as: E. King, et al., Coaching for Leadership Wisdom, Organ Dyn (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2020.100815>

information in itself is neither wise nor foolish. Rather, wisdom is about the fit of a solution to a context. The foundational activity that leads to creative, context-appropriate solutions is reflection. The central role of reflection in enacting wisdom underpins the unique value of coaching to develop wisdom. Firstly, coaching looks at how to apply knowledge and skills to the situation at hand. Secondly, coaches work to develop reflective skills with their clients, allowing them to work on their actions in relation to the challenges they face, within their current context. Thirdly, the development of wisdom is an ongoing process that requires sustained effort along with genuine commitment to wise leadership. Coaching can provide the motivation to sustain such an effort. Finally, coaches who understand how to facilitate the challenging journey towards wisdom are able to translate theory into practice because they have the communication tools to do so.

There are many different forms of coaching, more or less evidence-based and appropriate for coaching for wisdom. It is generally agreed that workplace coaching is categorized as either skills, performance or developmental coaching. Skills coaching is about the development of a specific skill such as the capacity to present information clearly to the management team. Performance coaching has a longer time frame but is still focused on the development of the individual in a specific domain, for example, the ability to run a complex project.

Developmental coaching, in contrast, has a broader remit to develop the person as a whole. It draws on a range of theoretical underpinnings and foregrounds reflection as a way of increasing the coachee's self-awareness and capacity to align behavior to stated purpose, values and goals. Coaching for wisdom involves evidence-based developmental coaching.

Like other forms of developmental coaching, coaching for wisdom focuses on professional and personal transformation. The coach uses the same communication skills in the developmental mode as they would use in other forms of coaching, mentoring or counselling but with a different purpose. The distinctions between these forms of communication are subtle, important and open to debate. The relevant difference for this paper is that while mentoring involves sharing personal experience and expertise in a particular domain and counselling addresses issues that are fundamentally personal and not professional, developmental coaching foregrounds the coachee's own experience and knowledge in a process designed to develop the whole person. The nuances between these different forms of communication are displayed in *Life of a King* which is discussed later in this paper. The blurred distinctions between niche forms of coaching, along with mentoring, consulting and counselling, add to the complexity faced by a coach when supporting others to develop wisdom.

This paper aims to cut through the complexity and strengthen the bridge that developmental coaching provides for leaders to move from theory to practice in the art of wise leadership. It does so by using models to explore what wisdom is, uses a movie to elicit a deeper practical and embodied understanding of such knowledge, and metaphor to integrate theories with practice. The reader will gain more from this paper if they are able to watch *Life of a King* which is available on, for example, Apple TV, Pluto TV,

FilmRise, Prime Video, Tubi TV and others. We have used the metaphor of chess to understand the development of wise leadership, while the movie depicts a case study of a chess coach that illuminates the journey for both the coach and those he coaches. Finally, the Compass Coaching Model is provided to assist the coach as s/he guides the coachee through a structured sequence of strategies.

Understanding Wisdom

The path towards greater wisdom starts with clarity about what wise action is. The limited discussion of wisdom in contemporary leadership discourse may be because of the difficulty in articulating what wisdom is, what it does, and how to develop it. Wisdom may be easier to grasp by first considering what it is not, by identifying the results of foolish, nonsensical or noxious leadership behavior and contrasting it with the results of wise leadership.

Corporate leadership is fertile ground for observing unwise and imprudent leaders. An example of systemic corporate, industry-wide leadership failure was revealed in Australia during the Haynes Royal Commission (Haynes, 2019) into the financial services and banking industry. Conducted in 2018 and 2019, the Royal Commission reported on unethical and illegal practices of financial organizations. The Royal Commission report showed that employees were routinely rewarded for carrying out unethical activities that went un-investigated and unpunished. For example, organizations continued to charge fees, including 'advice' fees, to dead clients even after notification of death. The misconduct findings (including potentially criminal misconduct) presented leadership failure on a grand scale.

The causes of such leadership failures are complex, and it is therefore imperative that we give due regard to the multiple pressures that organizational leaders are subject to. Pressures such as external shocks, policy changes, rapid changes in technology and markets, and even internal change through the loss of key people or other resources. Destructive leadership results from systemic as well as individual foolishness.

Positive leadership also results from systemic and individual processes as seen in the development of 'benefit organizations' or 'B Corps' (see www.bcorporation.net). These organizations aim to address social and environmental issues in parallel to creating shareholder value and, in so doing, display wisdom. Danone, the largest B-corp in the world, describes their vision as 'bringing health through food to as many people as possible' and one of their values is 'sustainable food production'.

So, what are the mechanisms of wisdom at work?

This question is addressed in the work of McKenna, Rooney and Boal (2009) who have articulated clearly the nature of wise leadership. Specifically, they note that such leaders are people who:

- 1 Use reason and careful observation;
- 2 Allow for non-rational and subjective elements in decisions;
- 3 Value personal humility and create humane and virtuous outcomes;
- 4 Take actions that are practical and oriented towards everyday life and work;

5 Seek the reward of contributing to a flourishing planet.

This way of conceptualizing wisdom has its origins in Aristotle's notion of practical wisdom but has extended it in light of Buddhist wisdom theory and contemporary research in neuroscience, psychology and consciousness studies. Importantly, it is not primarily a psychological theory of wisdom but a sociological one that understands wisdom as an activity embedded in social processes such as leadership.

This overview of the nature of wisdom allows us to understand that leadership wisdom is initiated by positive intention, is enacted within a moral framework and within the daily challenges of life, and involves integration of cognitive, emotional and moral reasoning in practice. What stands out in reviewing the nature of wise leadership is that wisdom is far more than is expressed through the concept of 'cognitive strength' which is often used as a description in the fields of positive psychology and organizational scholarship. What practical wisdom adds to the cognitive perspective is a broader idea of how an individual may develop wisdom, and more specifically, to embody and then enact it.

Considering the role of the CEO and the Board in unprecedented circumstance such as the Covid-19 pandemic brings the practices of wise leadership to life. Many white papers have been developed by consulting companies to advise executives about the pandemic. For example, an article in NACD Board Talk (April 2020) provides advice on the challenges facing Fortune 500 companies experiencing the fallout of the pandemic. The article summarizes feedback from 50 Fortune 500 Chairpersons and calls for CEOs and Boards to "model their values". The CEOs and directors called for moral discipline, a "steadfast Board focus" on long-term viability, and the importance of ethical intention. It also outlined the need to "protect the quality of decisions" despite incomplete information and the complexity involved in navigating swift action. Quality decision-making requires integration of logic and observation with the subjective wisdom born of experience. Suggestions included the use of scenario planning to course-correct quickly while always recognizing the practical problems associated with rapid decision-making. This feedback aligns with the characteristics of wisdom presented above and highlights the multi-faceted challenges of leading wisely.

The central problem, of course, is that it is much easier to say than to do, and this is the point at which coaching can make the difference. The delivery of wise leadership in this way is a physical, emotional, and cognitive balancing act. The mental skills required for effectively navigating a challenging environment and making wise decisions have been commented on by several CEOs in Egon Zehnder's CEO Report (Spring 2018). CEO perspectives on the value of coaching included that "it's about stepping back and reflecting, acknowledging I do not have all the answers and do not need to have them"; and "As CEO, I need the capacity to transform myself as well as my organization". The dangers of the task are also noted in the report such as "the sometimes-not-intended impact that every move and statement has". This last quotation emphasizes the vulnerability of leaders and the need to support them so they feel confident to follow a robust process in complex times – a process that allows them to recognize if they have performed as well as they could.

Translating Theory into Practice while Coaching

We understand that coaches meet widely different challenges, contexts and personalities in every working encounter and may need to respond quickly without always having the time to work systematically through the complexity required in coaching for wisdom. To better meet that challenge we have developed a simple evidence-based approach that reframes the social practice wisdom construct in a practical way for coaches to apply to the task. We call it the Compass Coaching model.

A compass shows direction relative to your current position and the intended destination (or endpoint) of a journey. It points consistently north and offers a sense of security because you can rely on it to help you keep track of your location and direction, even when the territory is unfamiliar, or you get it wrong and stray from your planned path – as we all inevitably do. Throughout history the compass has been celebrated as a symbol of direction and alignment. In [Diagram 1](#) below, the Compass Coaching model provides direction for navigating the complexity of coaching for wisdom. It integrates routines to build practical wisdom with an approach that can be adapted to respond to context. The framework guides coaches through their daily work-life, serving as the basis for the journey towards wisdom.

Step One: Commitment to coaching for wisdom. Wisdom development is a lifelong journey and is greatly enhanced by mentor-like support. Coaching provides a pragmatic and accessible means to such support and is particularly valuable when situations are changing so quickly that it becomes harder for leaders to hold on to core values and beliefs.

Coaching is about creating positive, directed change. While coaching will result in finding ways to live and work that are more productive and satisfying, it can be a challenging journey. Commitment and clarity on the process is key to staying on track. We can start the process of developing wisdom by committing to coach ourselves, or by starting a journey with a personal or peer coach. A written commitment to both coaching and the goal of developing wisdom is helpful here.

Step Two: Orientation to the greater good. Wisdom requires us to know what our values are. Clarity about our intention is the first step to making positive change in our lives. A good coach helps foreground what is most important to the person they are interacting with. Coaching allows goals to be set and reached by addressing the issues of what we really want to do with our life; why we may not be getting there or doing what is needed to do so; and what we are going to do about it. When we seek to develop wisdom, the intention for change necessarily involves enhancing the capacity to contribute to the greater good. Step Two is an invitation to imagine a desired future for oneself, others, and the community. What is helpful here is for coachees to develop a clear understanding of their core values and how they relate to being a wise leader.

Step Three: Mindfulness. Wisdom entails an understanding of the frequently unsatisfactory nature of life. Such an understanding is supported by mindfulness – skill in the deliberate use of attention and awareness with the intent to accept in an unbiased way what we observe. In this step



Diagram 1 The Compass Coaching Model: Moving from Theory to Practice.

- Commitment to coaching.
- Orientation - to the greater good, nothing is wise if it is not aimed at the greater good.
- Mindfulness, to discover and accept reality.
- Perspective expansion – to acknowledge interconnectedness.
- Action to address daily problems.
- Sensitivity to the impact of action, perspective and orientation.
- Strategies to stay directed towards the end game

we use these mental skills to develop a clear view of reality in the first instance without wanting to change it, avoid it or manipulate it in any way. Being able to do this creates clarity about the nature of the problems being faced and this assists the coachee when they come to make decisions and act in wise ways in response to problems. If these skills have not been developed in other areas of life, it will take effort but the potential returns for time and energy are considerable. If those skills are already developed, then sharpening them toward a dispassionate view of reality is an essential step. Step Three is about finding motivation for change through boldly observing what may not be working before considering what we would really like to see in our lives and world. It is good to encourage clients to start a reflective practice and not to avoid what is not working in their lives. Journaling reflections can be very useful.

Step Four: Perspective Expansion. Wisdom involves considering the big picture and the interconnected nature of life. At this stage the coaching process is about broadening perspective and seeing the connections between ourselves, others and our world. This involves gaining clarity on the impact that emotions have on our thoughts and behavior and then on the way our behaviors impact others. In leadership roles, it involves the way decisions impact various stakeholders and the cascade of influences that decisions may have. Step Four is about taking a bigger perspective – and remaining aware of it. What is helpful is to develop a meditation practice that focuses on awareness rather than the more familiar single point concentration. This kind of practice keeps the mind stable and independent of the

context it observes. An accessible way to start developing this skill is to sit quietly with eyes closed for 20 minutes keeping the mind aware of all the sounds around.

Step Five: Action. Wisdom is action. Wise people do all they can to address the daily troubles of people’s lives. When attention is focused on the reality of the situations we or others face, and a larger perspective is taken, we see that small, smart actions can make a big difference in people’s lives. This stage of the coaching process is about working out what can be done about both large and small problems, doing something about them, and being held accountable. Step Five is about action, about doing things wisely. It is helpful here to design behavioral experiments that give coachees small, achievable challenges at doing things that are aspects of wisdom. For example, setting a task such as asking a different co-worker each day for two weeks what would make them happier at work.

Step Six: Sensitivity to outcomes. Developing wisdom is an ongoing, iterative process where coachees apply knowledge and learn with the coach from the outcomes they observe. Wise people notice what subtle things happen. Along with discerning what is happening in their world, they notice the results of their actions. In this sixth step the coaching process is about perceiving the impact of an orientation to life and mindful attention to reality. It is also about the practical results of taking a bigger perspective and taking action to ease daily life. A bigger perspective results from the shared reflective space created when a coach listens deeply. Step Six is about staying sensitive to context and the changes that emerge for the coachee. It is useful to obtain

feedback from relevant people on how the coachee's actions or leadership practice impacts them and then to systematically examine and reflect on it with the coachee.

Step Seven: Strategies to stay on track. Wisdom involves planning your approach. A clear focus on the desired outcome and an understanding of the situation and the impact of actions enables us to reflect and create a strategy for better outcomes. In this stage of the process, coaching is about finding solutions. The search for such solutions can fruitfully be built by observing what works or by scenario planning with a focus on possible solutions. Step Seven is to strategize with the 'end game' and 'protecting the king' in mind, as is observed (using chess analogies) in the movie discussed below. A coachee can be helped to understand what really matters in life for them; that is, what their version of 'always protect the King' is.

The 'Compass' model is intended as a pragmatic approach to support skilled coaches in the task of developing practical wisdom. Given the significant challenges faced by our leaders and given their pressured environment, information overload and 24/7 accessibility, the task of developing wisdom remains a delicate one. We argue that understanding the balancing act and options that underpin success can be supported by engaging with the strong characters and narrative used in film. We now provide an example through a biographical account of leadership that developed through the challenges, hardships, and misadventures of one man's life.

The movie, *Life of a King* (Goldberger, 2013), traces the biography of Eugene Brown after his release from prison where he served 17 years for armed robbery. Eugene, who learned to play chess in prison, used his incarceration to reflect on his life, and chess as a theoretical model for thinking through and acting well in society. Chess is a strategy game and it became the model he used for developing his art of living which he continues to apply in his work with disadvantaged African American youths in Washington DC as their chess coach and life coach. The movie provides a rich and multilayered narrative that shows how coaching excellence is linked to developing a theory of wisdom (which draws from chess) to achieve eudaimonic (flourishing, health and prosperity) outcomes for African American young people. The world of the film is helpful for this paper because it can offer serious life obstacles for both coach and coachees to contemplate in terms of how to navigate threats, to set challenging and worthwhile goals and undertake difficult reflection.

Learning Through Movies

Film can be used in coaching as a means of illuminating lived experience. We included it in our approach to exploring complex ideas because of its potential to engage viewers at emotional, physical and cognitive levels. Incorporating this film enables insights into important dimensions of the social experience of a wise leader and coach, making it an appropriate tool by which to generate reflection. *Life of a King* helps us to envisage practical wisdom and its enactment across a wide range of circumstances. Both coaching and performing wise leadership are depicted as practical approaches enacted in the real world.

Film, like wisdom theory and leadership practice, is concerned with the social world. Film has the capacity to blur and dissolve boundaries between real, everyday experience and the cinematic world. Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley suggested in 2008 that fictional narratives, including film, function to abstract and simulate social information so that social experience can be more clearly understood, applied to other contexts and circumstances, and be acted upon. They argued that viewers transport themselves into represented events on screen, and, in so doing, experience personal enactments of social experience, enabling that experience to be more fully comprehensible. A series of events is experienced from the perspective of a single protagonist or a small number of central characters, so audiences experience that version of the world even if that perspective is radically different from their own.

The visual medium of film immediately draws attention to aspects of the human experience which may otherwise remain unnoticed. Our analysis of *Life of a King* may open up a 'safe' conversation about the nature of wisdom and ways in which wisdom and leadership can be enacted in everyday life. It is safe because viewers are observant of, but distanced from, the realities of dissimilar gender or cultural experiences. The knowledge we can acquire through watching this biographical film is primarily social knowledge about actual events. In the following section, our film analysis is the method we use to better understand the research-based models we adopted from the coaching and leadership literatures.

Life of a King

Life of a King opens inside a high-security prison. For the movie's first minute, the soundtrack is the prison warden's jangling keys and the sound of heavy boots on the floor as he walks alongside the cells. The sound echoes and reverberates off the walls. Visually, however, the focus of the scene is a chessboard awkwardly placed on what looks like an upturned milk crate, positioned in front of two prison cells and off to the right of the on-screen image. A disembodied right hand appears from between vertical grey metal bars to move a piece on the chessboard. The camera tracks along a few cells, stops, backtracks and depicts a right arm appearing from between metal bars to make a corresponding move on the chessboard. Then the original hand appears again to knock his own king over and resign. It is difficult to discern the faces and the people within the cells; both chess players are almost stripped of individual humanity. Meanwhile, the camera focuses and pauses on a brief conversation between the two men who cannot see each other's faces. In the foreground, there are two black pawns, two white pawns and a white knight that have been taken and placed on a horizontal metal bar. In spite of physical circumstances that are so bereft of almost any opportunity or material comfort, two men, confined to their prison cells, find a way to communicate, connect with each other and play.

The camera cuts to the prison courtyard where a brief conversation between the two chess players unfolds. The middle-aged African American, Eugene, acknowledges his vulnerability in his imminent release from prison. After years in prison, he reflects that he no longer has many friends on

the outside. There is also the issue of employment. How will a former prisoner even find honest work? Eugene's mentor, the Chessman, a man who will never be released from prison, urges him to 'just keep your eye on the endgame. Everything else will fall into place.' The two do not present as possible leaders, life coaches or even purveyors of wisdom, and yet, within such sparse circumstances, the older man seems to have arrived at a place of acceptance. The Chessman removes a black wooden king from his pocket, a chess piece and an object of beauty that he has himself created. As he gives it to Eugene, he reminds him to 'Take care of the king. Everything else follows.' And viewers, together with Eugene, receive this apparently simple piece of advice which applies to the game of chess as well as to life. The opening title credits roll as Eugene is released from prison and driven into Washington DC. The wintry blue sky and bright sunlight are almost blinding as Eugene Brown experiences freedom for the first time in seventeen years. The white buildings of the city gleam as soulful background music rises. Viewers are already paying emotional attention to the world on screen.

The possibility of wisdom as enacted by Eugene Brown is examined here in relation to the observed characteristics of wise leadership discussed earlier. It is a version of wisdom initially modelled by the Chessman in prison, then by Eugene, and, in the latter part of *Life of a King*, adopted by Eugene's mentee, T (Tahime). The first observed characteristic is that wise leaders use reason and careful observation, and this movie frequently represents Eugene observing his environment and those with whom he interacts. Sequences at Maud Alton High School where he gains work as a school janitor portray him looking at the classroom that serves as the setting for the Detention Club and noticing the students in that space. These are moments when the camera swings behind Eugene's head and observes different students in the room and the posters and writing on the back wall. There is virtually no action, minimal dialogue and no voiceover. But the modestly dressed Eugene, who has been asked to temporarily supervise the group, is not unsettled by this unexpected task.

The second observed characteristic was that wise leaders allow for non-rational and subjective elements when making decisions and that there are emotional aspects to any decision-making process. Wisdom, they say, manifests as concern for others, being thoughtful and fair, admitting mistakes, and also learning from them. A concern for others and a willingness to acknowledge mistakes is a fundamental part of Eugene's character and is prominent in his relationship with his own children, Katrina and Marco. In an early scene between Eugene and his daughter that takes place on the pavement outside her home, Eugene willingly admits his failings: 'I know I made mistakes in the past, a lot of mistakes. I'm just trying to make things right, that's all. I'm just trying to make things right with you, Katrina. You're my girl.' He walks alongside her to the bus stop, repeating his wish to 'make things right' between them. Even when the bus pulls away and the doors close on him, he repeatedly attempts to connect with her. He also tries to repair his relationship with Marco. Focused on re-building the relationship, he begins by writing letters to Marco who is in a juvenile detention center and, finally, secures permission to visit him there.

Within the context of supervising high school students at the Detention Club, Eugene introduces the concept of play. His own game of choice is chess, but it takes a while before the students agree to it. He demonstrates his concern for others by persuading a group of young students to suggest a game. Their life is so bleak it is easy to forget they are still at high school. Initially, the students resist Eugene but then he makes it clear he is not intimidated by even 'big bad Clifton'. Again, Eugene mentions the game of chess, handles individual chess pieces and patiently attempts to generate interest in the king. Instead, one student called Peanut suggests a round of cards. Eugene's response is to frame an arrangement whereby if Eugene wins, he chooses the next game and now he has the attention of the majority of the students. After winning several times, Eugene can finally introduce the game of chess. From his pocket, he removes the black wooden king, given to him in prison by the Chessman, introducing the students to the most important piece in the game: 'This is a king. This is your life. One mistake and it can be taken away.' At the next few Detention Club meetings, Eugene reminds them that all the pieces on the board are there for one reason only: to protect the king. He details the possible moves of each piece but keeps returning to his central point – to protect the king. This is wisdom enacted at its most vital and fundamental level, appropriate to this specific context – the survival and life achievement of each and every one of the students.

The fourth observed characteristic is that wise leaders take actions that are practical and oriented towards everyday life and work. In *Life of a King*, there are several sequences and film montages in which Eugene demonstrates his willingness to carry out practical work. He is not a character who pontificates on the theory of wisdom from behind his desk. In the first sequence, he mops the neglected corridors at Maud Alton High School beneath a banner that states 'Peace Within Me'. In the second, he sweeps the hallway with a dustpan and brush. In the third, and with the help of Peanut, who is now President of the Chess Club and owner of the black wooden king, he renovates a dilapidated house turning it into a community Chess House. In the fourth, just after the film's midpoint, Eugene, with the support of the students, re-paints and restores the Chess House after it has been vandalized. On the fourth sequence, they are all devastated and in shock after the fatal shooting of Peanut. Nevertheless, Eugene orients himself to everyday life and begins the process again of restoring the Chess House. The music on the soundtrack is the jazzy energizing swing number, Aceyalone's 'Push and Pull', which motivates everyone to help out. Katrina visits Eugene there and Tahime also returns to support him. The wooden king that Peanut was keeping safe before his death has now been passed on to Tahime, a symbolic gesture that reminds the viewer of the necessity of keeping the focus on taking care of the king. Protecting the king represents keeping focus on '(how you live) your life'.

In the last thirty minutes of *Life of a King*, the focus shifts to concentrate on school-aged student Tahime. His commitment to chess is developed alongside his ability, in life, to 'think before he moves', with the film maintaining the metaphor of chess and life. The community at the Chess House widens its reach to include a more diverse group of adolescents and young adults. Eugene Brown develops his

own contribution by taking the group out into the wider community, participating in state chess competitions and, simultaneously, the fifth characteristic outlined by McKenna et al., bringing about good outcomes (the end game). In a brief scene back in prison, Eugene and Tahime visit the Chessman in search of advice for an upcoming chess tournament. Before the Chessman reveals the move that could make the likely opponent vulnerable, Tahime interrupts him saying, 'I appreciate all this. I really do. I just . . . This is something I have to do by myself'. And with this declaration, Tahime enacts his own version of a wise and ethical way of being in the world, one that together with his creative talent for chess is likely to secure him a university scholarship, as is made clear shortly before the film's closing scene. It is also the moment at which viewers may recognize that the mentee has developed into a mentor. From here onwards, in spite of the occasional setback or obstacle, both Eugene and Tahime overcome adversity to enact embodied wise leadership and the potential for leadership in their own lives.

The role of the successful coach is to help others find those practical ways to act wisely in the complex, unpredictable and uncertain world they inhabit. What we learn from *Life of a King* is that successful coaching is context-driven, and its purpose varies with the challenges faced by the coachee, and because of that infinite variability the coach experiences challenges in planning individualized programs. Individual versions of wise leadership may be more readily communicated by using cinematic representations of lived experience. Working with disadvantaged teenagers will focus on different issues and call for different conversations compared to working with senior managers or with corporate teams who need a collegial understanding of purpose and values. In this case, always protect the king, think before you act, and keep your eye on the endgame were understandable rules and they created the core of a framework that transformed young people's lives. When we have a concise framework within which to base our approach, coaching for wisdom in action becomes easier to plan. A clear understanding of what wisdom is will allow us to more easily see it in action in the workplace. The capacity to clearly observe wisdom in action, recognizing the behavior that enacts it can then guide us to be able to develop it.

Having unpacked what wisdom looks like we turn now to how we can develop wisdom at work.

Developing Wisdom – 7 Practices

Wisdom development is a process that unfolds throughout life in some people. It requires education and the self-resources to effectively confront the realities of life and to navigate challenging experiences constructively. There are two general views on how wisdom is developed, and they place different emphasis on the role that direct personal experience plays and how much can be determined by indirect experience such as building social knowledge of the world. The popular view is that direct experience in life builds wisdom. However, wisdom research shows weak correlation between wisdom and age or wisdom and direct experience. What matters is how one *reflects* on and *reframes* one's own and others' experiences for psychological and spiritual growth. The central idea is that wisdom is

more than knowledge - perspective changing and developing empathy for others being processes that transcend cognition. Our interest here is to integrate what is known about the development of wisdom into a practical application. If the wisdom Coaching Compass mainly focusses on a general understanding of, or the philosophy, or strategy underpinning, coaching for wisdom, we need to also focus on specific development activities, tactics, processes and practices so that coachees can learn how to exhibit wise leadership. So, what activities can a coach suggest to deliberately, and proactively develop leadership wisdom?

We turn to a well-accepted approach to explain the task. Robert Sternberg's Balance Theory has provided a framework of practical procedures to use in a wisdom development program. In his Balance Theory of Wisdom, Sternberg provided a list of six procedures for teaching wisdom that we have adapted for leadership development through specific coaching of seven practices. [Diagram 2](#) below outlines those adapted procedures before translating them into leadership situations. These are tools for the coach to use with the coachee in the context of applying the Compass Coaching Model. Our movie displays many of them being implemented.

In **Practice One**, which encourages reflection, the coach aims to increase the leader's capacity for meta-cognition, the capacity to be aware of his or her own thinking and the relationship to his or her emotions and behavior – this ultimately provides leaders with greater control over their lives. Meta-cognition sets the foundation for the following practices. For example, Tahime learning the habit of thinking first - 'Think before you move'.

In **Practice Two**, where learning projects are set, the coach works with the coachee to set action learning projects whereby the leader reflects on lessons learned from literature and film, philosophy, or spiritual texts. Projects involve applying such lessons to the leader's own life and leadership, then observing the impact such projects have on themselves and others. In this practice, the coach aims to facilitate the leader to go further than reflection alone, to use their projects to develop a greater capacity to both compare and contrast different perspectives on complex situations, and to consider ways to integrate diverse viewpoints. In this

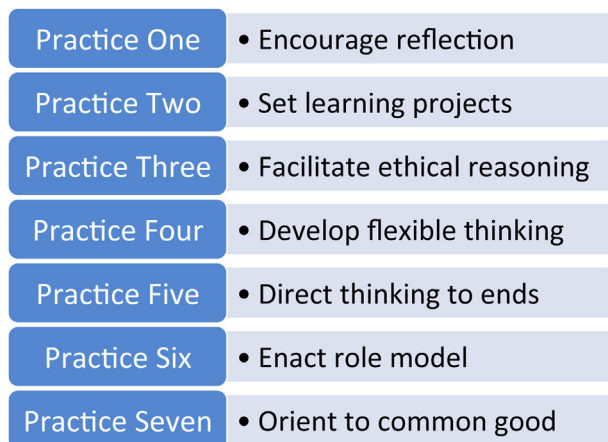


Diagram 2 Developing Wisdom Toolkit: Seven Coaching Practices

way leaders expand their own social knowledge and increase their decision-making confidence as they become acutely aware of **why** they are making those kinds of decisions. For example, Tahime saying that he wants to do it on his own as he has developed a sense of confidence and ability to take control of his life, he is protecting the king.

Practice Three which facilitates ethical reasoning uses the first two practices to enable leaders to consider the ethics of their actions. Here the coach supports the leader to refine the capacity for ethical reasoning. When an important challenge arises, the leader and coach work to determine an ethical rule for making the decision (possibly a rule that has been investigated during the first two practices), considering the possible consequences of applying the rule, using it and observing the outcome. This practice focuses leaders to adopt positive ethical values such as the lesson Tahime learnt from his disqualification for not having permission from his mother to participate in his first chess tournament, the need to act within the rules.

Practice Four and its focus on developing flexible thinking builds on the strong ethical values revealed so far to embolden leaders to think differently to determine and deliver practical solutions to the problems faced by their organizations and society. The coach takes a solution-focused approach to move quickly from the defined problem, to co-create a list of options that highlight how to do more of what works and to consider possible solutions that might benefit others and society in general. In this way the coach encourages the development of creative, practical, positive, and flexible thinking, an example being the resilience of Eugene and the students in re-establishing the chess club off campus after Eugene was fired.

Practice Five directs thinking to ends, using the ethical strength and cognitive flexibility that has now been galvanized. The coach facilitates the investment to develop the mental strength to pay attention consistently to the purpose of action – to focus on the end game/result. The coach engages the leader in reflection and discussion about the concepts they have been investigating so far and encourages the leader to consider how such ideas can be used to create better or worse outcomes – then to go further and reflect on the importance of any particular ends or goals in this context. As an example, we can consider the mantra, “always keep your eye on the end game”.

Practice Six calls for a ‘role model’ technique and requires the coach to model wisdom. The coach needs to be a role model themselves to be able to share openly their own thinking processes and ethical rules and to share examples of their own approach to difficult situations and learnings appropriately. For example, the critical role played by the Chessman who is serving a life term but who coached and mentored Eugene.

Practice Seven orients practice to the common good and involves developing a consistent theme that guides all activities, including across different contexts and different relationships. The coach energizes the leader to consider the importance of seeking to balance the interests of multiple stakeholders and create the most positive outcome for him/herself and others.

The biggest challenge in becoming a wise leader and for coaching for it, is learning to embody the mindset and practices of wisdom. The coaching process described in

the Compass Model, and these seven practices can be thought of as dynamic simulation tasks that break wisdom down into smaller actions so that doing these things becomes habituated and therefore embodied. An embodied practice is one that you not only do but is one that you will have a strong tendency to do, even under the pressure of uncertainty. Thus, under the pressure of competing in chess, or leading in chaos, you not only think the right thoughts, but you have what it takes to actually make the right moves.

CONCLUSION

Wisdom is often understood as an art of living rather than a composite of individual-level cognitive and personality traits, which contemporary leadership theory tends to focus on. As an art, being wise is not a form of perfection. Mainstream leadership theory fails to capture the imperfect leader as artist who nevertheless embodies the admirable behaviors and outcomes that wisdom theory calls for. The leadership literature abounds with definitions of different forms of leadership and could be read, we argue, as suggesting that authentic, servant and transformational leaders are saints rather than artists, defined by their ideas and attitudes, rather than as producers of desirable outcomes. Saints, we hasten to add, are extremely rare and wise people somewhat less so. Wise leadership has been developed in response to such shortcomings in mainstream leadership discourse.

It is salient, then, to demonstrate why our movie acts as a case study for wise leadership. For the sake of economy, we highlight what the movie says about humility. Humility is central to wisdom and is essential in leadership. An important reason for using *Life of a King* as a model of wise leadership is to represent this point. The ‘great actor’ leadership theory promotes a kind of grandiosity. Our wise leader/coach, Eugene, is a former armed robber, drug dealer, and convict who becomes a janitor, mops floors, and is then fired, with no income. He is not grand but rather has low social status and has no positional, political or economic power. He is also African American. His behavior and self-image are the opposite of grandiose, he is humble and unassuming. Eugene stands as a leader in stark contrast to many of our political leaders and CEOs and as a model is much more accessible than the saintly leader ideal.

The wise leadership theory has developed from Aristotle’s notion of practical wisdom, which urges us to understand that wisdom’s ultimate benefit to the world is for people to conduct themselves wisely in the course of living in a complex, challenging, messy, resource-constrained world to produce desirable and important outcomes for society. While helpful, a theory of living wisely is insufficient on its own for practical wisdom; one must put philosophical theory into practice, and one needs a developmental regime designed to foster the skills of ‘doing life’ wisely. The developmental process of embodying wisdom is ongoing and requires teachers and guides. In the context of work, coaches play a crucial role in the development of wisdom.

In summary, when seeking to develop wisdom we suggest keeping the following points in mind.

- One has to learn to develop wisdom and coaching will help.

- Coachees must have the courage to get it wrong - to be wise, one must first of all have been unwise.
- Wisdom requires habits of wise decisions and intentions.
- Wisdom matters most when facing unique challenges.
- Nothing is wise if it is not ethical and aimed at the greater good.

In this paper, we have aimed to provide an evidence-based and practical approach for people seeking to develop or provide wise leadership in a period of challenge and unnerving rates of change – where wisdom matters most. We have provided a model to guide the understanding of both wise

action and the development of the same. We have presented a movie to support an embodiment of such knowledge and metaphors of the compass, chess, and the life of a king to aid reflection and remembering. We welcome your feedback on our modeling and metaphors for wisdom, and the movie.

FUNDING

This research did not receive any specific grant funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for –profit sectors.



SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

If you would like to understand more about the importance of paying attention to wisdom you will gain insight from Robert Sternberg's 2018 paper called "Wisdom, Foolishness and Toxicity in Human Development," in *Research in Human Development*. This paper identifies the difference between intelligence and wisdom.

If you are motivated to pay attention to the development of wisdom, then it is important to increase your understanding of what it really is. For more information, you can read the paper by McKenna, Rooney and Boal written in 2009 and published in the *Leadership Quarterly* - "Wisdom Principles as a Meta-theoretical Basis for Evaluating Leadership".

To learn more about the practices that can be used to develop wisdom read the 2004 Sternberg article "What is Wisdom and how to Develop it" published in *ANNALS, AAPSS*. It describes in detail the practices we have summarized in

[Diagram 2](#). You could also read about ways to develop wisdom in a paper 'Wisdom can be Taught, Learning and Instruction' by Bruya and Ardel published in 2018.

To understand more about coaching you could consult 'The Complete Handbook of Coaching' by Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck, (2018), Sage Publications.

To understand more about film as the abstraction and simulation of social experience, you can read Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley's article on the function of fiction, published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science* (2008).

Finally, to confirm our earlier suggestion, you will be able to watch the film through Apple TV - "Life of a King" (2013), Goldberger, J. (Writer); T. Kelly, T. (Producer) Millenium Entertainment, US.

David Rooney: Conceptualization, Writing - review & editing, Data curation.

CREDIT AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Elizabeth King: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Data curation, Project administration, Visualization. **Kate Norbury:** Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing, Formal analysis.

APPENDIX A. SUPPLEMENTARY DATA

Supplementary material related to this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2020.100815>.

Elizabeth King (The School of Psychology, Sydney University, Camperdown, NSW 2006. Email: e.king@sydney.edu.au) is a leadership development adviser and an acknowledged author and scholar focusing on the role of mindfulness at work, and wisdom in leadership. Currently engaged at the Coaching Psychology Unit of the University of Sydney, as an Adjunct Fellow at Macquarie University, and Founding Director of Metamindfulness. Prior to commencing her consulting practice in leadership development, C-suite coaching and training, Dr. King held senior marketing and executive positions in five of Australia's leading pharmaceutical companies. Her academic background includes a Science degree in Biotechnology, an MBA from Macquarie Graduate School of Management (MGSM), a Masters of Coaching and Human Resource Management from Sydney University, postgraduate training in Mind Body Medicine at Harvard and a PhD from MGSM, titled "Developing leaders to perform in uncertainty: The mindfulness solution".

Kate Norbury (The School of Psychology, Sydney University, Camperdown, NSW 2006) has a PhD in Representations of Creativity in Television and Film from Macquarie University, a Masters degree in Literature from Surrey University, and a MA in French and German from Cambridge University. She has widely published on trauma, guilt and shame in fiction, and overcoming adversity through creativity.

David Rooney (Macquarie University, School of Business and Economics, Macquarie Park NSW 2109. Email: David.rooney@mq.edu.au) is Honorary Professor of Management and Organisation Studies at Macquarie Business School, Macquarie University. He has researched, taught and published widely in the areas of the wisdom, leadership, the knowledge-based economy, and creative industries. His books include *Wisdom and Management in the Knowledge Economy*, *Public Policy in the Knowledge-Based Economy*, the *Handbook on the Knowledge Economy*, and *Knowledge Policy: Challenges for the Twenty First Century*. Professor Rooney has published in major academic journals including *The Leadership Quarterly*, *Public Administration Review*, *Human Relations*, *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, and the *Journal of Business Ethics*.