

# The Wisdom of Leadership

By Dexter Dunphy and Tyrone Pitsis

*The purpose of life is to give birth to oneself (Erich Fromm)*

The journey to wisdom can follow many paths, one of which is the challenging realm of managing. The work of managers draws on knowledge and experience to inform action – which is the essence of wisdom. The choice of a wisdom path is basically arbitrary and ultimately of no great significance. We can seek wisdom by travelling the path of a manager, a potter, a tennis player or a clown. What matters is that we pursue wisdom with integrity and tenacity, prepared to engage in the exacting discipline that is the only basis of true wisdom. Because managerial leadership is so central to modern society, so difficult and demanding an activity, it is a worthy path to mastery and wisdom.

But how do we gain mastery in leadership? We now discuss the stages by which mastery is achieved.

## 1. The novice: learning ‘the rules’

Many people become novice leaders without apparent choice. For example, the engineer who finds that three to four years out of university she must lead a sizeable project, or the accountant who finds himself promoted to head the accounting section.

Many people become leaders reluctantly and feel out of their depth. They find that the basis of their security, their traditional expertise, is becoming out of date and irrelevant to what they are doing. Therefore, when they finally *choose* the leadership path, they search for rules to guide their action.

At first the novice clings to rules for security but over time learns that rules don’t always work.

## 2. The advanced beginner: beyond rules to strategy

The novice then becomes the *advanced beginner*. As she acquires more experience, she discovers that leadership is complex and the rules she relied on are oversimplifications.

Rules now evolve into strategies. ‘*Yes, but the rules for appraisal I have learned must be modified when I am dealing with stubborn defensiveness in the person being appraised. In these circumstances, my strategy is...*’ The outcome is the cumulative building of expertise – knowledge grounded in experience.

## 3. Competence: disciplined effectiveness

Gradually the advanced beginner realises that the world is complex, ambiguous and highly uncertain. So she seeks certainty through experience and expertise, selecting and responding to cues on the basis of accumulating experiential knowledge. Competencies develop. The kinds of competencies that leaders use on a day-to-day basis, so critical to progression to higher stages of proficiency, are of two kinds – task competencies, such as problem solving, and interpersonal competencies, such as influencing and networking. There is a range of such useful competencies but all of them are embedded in and depend on the two core competencies of *self-leadership* and *communication*. If we aren’t aware of our own personal qualities and in control of our inner self, we can’t lead others. Even if we are good at self-leadership, if we can’t

communicate effectively through listening and articulating our ideas and ideals, we can't lead others. These two skills are so fundamental that they underlie all other leadership competencies.

#### **4. Proficiency: fluid effortless performance**

The next stage is *proficiency*: a high level of competence based on a fusion of knowledge with experience. The evidence for the attainment of proficiency is *effortless performance*. Rules and strategies are now deeply internalised so that a disciplined intuition dominates and reason is secondary. The proficient professional can explain her behaviour - but only on reflection after the fact.

#### **5. Mastery**

The final step is to become a *master*, that is, to act from one's deepest intuition with confidence and flow.

The master goes beyond ego to become one with the organising process, changing herself and the organisational world at the same time. For the master the inner and outer worlds are one; they are interdependent and interpenetrating. The master speaks with personal authority and economy of words, acts minimally with effortless spontaneity and perfect timing to produce maximum impact.

The spontaneity of the master often resembles the spontaneity of the novice – the difference is in the impact they have. The novice's action is hit and miss. The master's action, by contrast, is calm, reliable, persistent, precise and elegant in its efficiency. The master acts in concert with the unfolding forces in the situation and connects with their potential energy to bring about change.

As the ancient Greek proverb goes: "I am moving slowly because I am in a hurry". The master has learned the secret of 'not doing' and knows how to wait for the critical moment when what may be a small intervention can bring about substantial change.

#### **The challenge of progression**

Progression through these stages is by no means automatic. Each stage requires overcoming increasing challenges. The challenges appear to be external but are always ultimately internal. They depend on us making spiritual progress, what Carlos Casteneda calls, *abandoning the fortress of the self*. There is usually a crisis at the transition point between the stages, because the transition to the next stage involves the apparent sacrifice of much that has been learned before.

In moving to the next stage, the *novice/advanced beginner* has to 'give up' relying on the very rules that she has spent so much time acquiring and which have provided a sense of security in a confusing world. The *expert* has to abandon the highly organised world of the specialty that has provided standing, status and certainty if he is to move on. The *professional* has to understand that the proficiency in which she had such pride was an illusion – and plunge into the mystery of the unknown again – before she can become a *master*.

The master has learnt to live with resistance to ideas that are often seen as radical. She accepts that things are as they are and that only by understanding this, can change occur. She understands that the sacrifices she makes in the short term are far outweighed by the positive outcomes in the future – outcomes that will continue long after she is gone. This is leadership mastery.

This article is an extract from the “Wisdom” chapter in the latest Management Today Series book “The Seven Heavenly Virtues of Leadership”. Each chapter in the book covers a different heavenly virtue of leadership including humility, compassion, wisdom, passion, integrity, courage and humour.

The National launch of this book will take place on **July 9**. Don't miss your opportunity to meet with Mark Strom and Fabian Dattner, authors of the humility and compassion chapters respectively.

For more information about this event [click here](#)

### **About the Authors**

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After graduating from Sydney University, Dexter taught in state schools then went on to complete a PhD at Harvard University. He returned from the USA to take up a senior lectureship in Sociology at the University of NSW and in 1972 gave the ABC's prestigious Boyer lectures on “The Challenge of Change”. He moved on to the Australian Graduate School of Management as a Professor of Management and more recently to the University of Technology, Sydney, as Distinguished Professor.

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Tyrone grew up as a child of Greek migrants in Sydney's Newtown. He dropped out of school at 14 and eventually found a job as a kitchen hand. He went on to become an executive chef. While working as a chef he completed an honours degree with distinction from the University of New South Wales, then began his academic career at the Australian Graduate School of Management.