

# Foreword

## by Peter Senge

Few words have a longer historical association with leadership than wisdom, and few have less credibility in that association today.

What has happened?

First, it seems that we have lost our consensual definition of what wisdom actually is. In earlier eras, when elders had revered places in community, we had a way of understanding wisdom through example. The elders grounded us in appreciating the importance of perspective, in seeing things from multiple points of view, in considering what the past could teach us about the future, and in reminding us that many things we might think were our own unique problems had in fact been faced by others before and we should meditate on what we could learn from that.

Second, in an era that has little deep concern about the future, wisdom has little functional value. For wisdom has always been concerned with balancing the short term and the long term—of seeing possible longer-term consequences of our actions in and for the future.

But for most of us most of the time, the future does not really exist. Indeed, an important feature of the modern era has been the marginalization of the future. The future has become an abstraction rather than a reality with which we are emotionally connected. An economist's prediction. A futurist's fantasy images. A few more technological gadgets.

Something that will come someday but is of little importance in shaping the decisions we make today. Spend now, pay later. Get the stock price as high as possible so that your public stock offering brings in as much money as possible. Live for the moment. The future will take care of itself. The end of history (and, by implication, the end of the future).

All of this seemed to work so long as people could basically assume that the future was more or less an extrapolation of the past, just with another 3 percent of GDP growth and more technology.

But then that complacency started to wear thin. Gradually, a deep and pervasive anxiety about the future began to set in. Climate change. Food safety. Pollution. Toxicity in everyday products (and more and more people getting cancers at younger and younger ages). The gap between rich and poor. Social and political instability. Terrorism.

Today, according to a Gallup Poll, two-thirds of sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds in America believe the world was a better place when their parents were their age—and over half are convinced it will be worse for their own children. With this pessimism has come historically low confidence ratings for virtually all the primary institutions that shape modern society: business, investors, public education, health care, Congress.

So now, wisdom may be making a comeback—if it weren't for the fact that most people seem to regard it as a thing of bygone eras, a sort of historical footnote, or maybe myth, that is so antithetical to how we think and act today that the phrase *wise leadership* seems almost an oxymoron.

That is why this book is so important.

First, it corrects a basic misconception, that wisdom is not developable. Coming from diverse contemplative traditions, the authors bridge modern challenges with ancient understandings of how wisdom can be cultivated: through continual reflection, through silence, and through connecting with the highest in yourself and others.

Second is that wisdom is not about just a few wise people but about the capacity of human communities to make wise choices and to orient themselves around a living sense of the future that truly matters to them. Wisdom is about connection, connection to one another and to a larger whole. It is an inherently relational concept and founders when we overidentify it with particular people.

While the world's cultures offer a rich storehouse of stories of extraordinary individuals who exercised wisdom, upon closer inspection what makes the stories compelling is what emerged collectively. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. were not wise leaders just because of what they said but also because of the coordinated and consequential actions they helped inspire among millions. But even these examples are misleading, insofar as they start with the central leadership figure. For it is the everyday emergence of collective intelligence in teams, communities, and networks that is most relevant for today.

Marianne Knuth, cofounder of Kufunda Village, a network of sustainable agriculture villages in Zimbabwe, and of Pioneers of Change, one of many extraordinary global youth leadership networks tackling the most pressing issues of our time, expresses this sensibility of action for the whole in criticizing why most direct aid efforts to address poverty fail:

The development sector is still engaged in a large-scale mechanistic and hierarchical approach to addressing the challenges of poverty and so-called under-development. In the name of material development, villages and communities have to adopt less communal ways of relating to each other. In the name of development, problems are fixed for a community without recognizing the need for ownership in the development initiative by the community itself.

The consequence is that “larger scale development initiatives fix a problem for a short term, only to have the problem return years later (abandoned boreholes, broken down toilets, or community pumps for which no one has taken ownership after the intervener has left).”<sup>1</sup>

Third, the authors show that rather than being a “feel good” concept with little tangible impact, wisdom is all about results, and especially what is achieved over the longer term. Groups dedicated to developing collective wisdom can have dramatically greater effectiveness in what they achieve. Throughout this book are examples of how collective wisdom arises and is shaped precisely through people’s engagement with real problems, and through learning how to achieve lasting outcomes that matter.

In this process of engaging real problems, a subtlety also emerges that distinguishes collective wisdom from other, more common forms of intelligence. The world is full of smart people. Every failed third world developmental program, every failed corporate strategy, every disastrous national policy was designed by smart people. The real dis-

inction between wisdom and the types of intelligence that abound in modern society comes from not knowing the answers. Wisdom manifests in humility rather than arrogance. It is known by its quiet presence rather than by noisy advocacy for one way. In this sense, collective wisdom is much more about the capacity for learning than about a single brilliant decision.

All learning arises through doing, but the most frequent problem is the “learning,” not the “doing.” Our organizations and societies are full of doing but deficient in learning. I believe there is no more telling indicator of the absence of collective wisdom than the inability to learn as we go. It is characterized by rigidity and dogma. It is characterized by low trust and the inability to talk about difficult subjects where people must recognize their shortfalls. It is characterized by maintaining a façade of confidence and competence that masks insecurity and fear of failure. Conversely, collective wisdom is most evident in quiet confidence that our “not knowing” is our strength, that the ability to ask deep questions is more important than offering superficial answers—and that imagination, commitment, patience and openness, and trust in one another will consistently trump IQ over the long haul.

Why does all this matter, especially today? Because the problems we face today do not have “right answers.” Our most pressing problems are characterized by unprecedented levels of complexity and interdependence, and the consequent breakdown of the conventional problem-solving paradigm. The well-known conflict resolution facilitator Mark Gerzon says in this book, “Humanity is hungering for

wisdom. That is the word I hear most: not *compassion*; not *love*; not *peace*; not *kindness*—but *wisdom*.” This is precisely because we sense that the major challenges we face will not be solved by a few more smart people or technological magic bullets.

Lastly, because of this urgency, what matters most today is not only to clarify what wisdom is and why it matters, but to understand how to go about developing collective wisdom. That is why the most important contribution of this book is not just pointing out that wisdom is developable, but offering stories and practices that can help each of us in our own wisdom journey.

In our work, we have come to see this journey revolving around three intertwined openings, what Otto Scharmer terms opening the mind, opening the heart, and opening the will.<sup>2</sup> These three openings are each evident in the stories and practices presented in the pages that follow: learning how to listen more deeply and suspend our taken-for-granted mental models, how to connect with one another in that listening, and, perhaps quietly and barely noticed, how to pay attention to why we are here.

Reflecting on her journey, Knuth says simply, “In the beginning was the meeting. . . . How we meet people determines all else. Do we meet people assuming the best we can about them? Do we meet each person curious about the miracle of a human being that we are about to connect with? Or do we meet a *poor* person that we are about to help?”

She tells a story of Anna, a widow of forty-six who lives on a \$2 per month pension from her late husband but must pay \$20 every three months in children’s school fees. Despite

these hardships, Anna set up a women's crochet cooperative, started teaching knitting to women in her area, built her own compost toilet and taught others how to do the same, and now runs an AIDS dialogue group and provides home care for AIDS patients. Asked how all this was possible, Anna says, "I have learnt that I have been an example in my community for being a widowed woman who overcame severe hardship. I have learnt that I am a strong woman. I have learnt that I can find peace of mind within myself. I have learnt that I am a good listener, and I am trustworthy." Knuth adds, "I do not understand how all of these things are happening. But I do know that we met Anna *in her wisdom*. Not in her poverty."<sup>3</sup>

For me, the promise of this work is that we all learn more and more how to meet one another in our wisdom. Then our challenges will appear not as threats to our way of life but as opportunities to grow into life itself.

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