

THE WISDOM PROJECT

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

T. S. Eliot, 'Choruses from the Rock'

ECCLAR

The Euro-China Centre for Leadership and Responsibility (ECCLAR), based at the China Europe International Business School, Shanghai is committed, through research, education, forum and networking building, to contribute to the development of responsible leadership in Chinese organisations. ECCLAR's mission and activities are focused on two primary tasks:

[1] *Leadership* development

[2] Awareness enhancement and internalisation of the *responsibility* dimension in organisational and individual behaviours and actions.

As part of our mission, we are launching *The Wisdom Project* in April 2010.

An Observation

At ECCLAR we believe that responsible and wise decision-making by executive leaders is a hope for the future of our world. Yes, there are universally shared challenges for the human race: managing the future impacts of climate change, water scarcity and the growing demand for food and energy. There are socio-economic crises that present us all with the sense that our mutual economic and social wellbeing is under threat through the effects and future uncertainties associated with volatile financial and trading markets. We need wisdom.

Corporations are now competing for a future in which sustainability has been inserted into their strategic frame of reference and with it high degrees of uncertainty about the plethora of sustainable initiatives and projects with which to engage. The demand for 'quick fixes' to complex ethical, social and environmental challenges in a highly competitive environment has given rise to questionable judgments. We need wise leaders.

Standing back from the competitive corporate framework, questions need to be asked about how judgments are being made by management and in whose interests. Investment and consumer markets are distrustful and suspicious of corporate motivations and brand claims. Business schools have not moved swiftly enough to prepare managers for the movement away from traditional business practices and

certainties. The nature of moral agency at board level is under scrutiny as analysts assess how smart the CEO is at making judgments that are seen to be fair and wise to shareholders, employees, customers, NGOs and governments.

A larger question looms concerning the notion of sustainability as a panacea for the future of the people and the planet. Sustainability is about maintaining and preserving – but is that enough for the growing world population? Is there not a cause for innovative and wise leaders to go beyond the knowledge-based maintenance paradigm towards enterprises that can multiply resources rather than simply conserve them?

At ECCLAR, we believe that we are witnessing a fresh and universal realisation that the world is a “Commons” rather than just a set of independent territories to be exploited for selfish gain. The awareness of a shared and sustainable Commons requires *responsible leaders* in public, private and NGO sectors who understand and accept their responsibility to steward the resources in their care for the good of their organisation as well as for the good of the Commons. Such leaders will have developed the capacity to integrate the economic, the social and the environmental realms and inspire trust in their organisational communities through the quality of their judgement and character. We believe business can *do well* and *do good* when led by smart leaders who know how to make wise decisions. Leaders who understand the knowledge economy but have also discovered the economy of wise enterprise in their leadership. We want to find out more about them. We call it the Wisdom Project.

Stage 1 Survey

We anticipate that the Wisdom Project will have a number of stages of enquiry and we need to start with a simple and pure enquiry into the understanding of wisdom in management decision-making. How do the best managers and leaders make decisions? Sure, they need quality information and a solid knowledge resource. They need to use reason in making fact-based decisions. But is there anything more? We think so. We think that making wise judgments is the difference in consistently successful decision-making. But we’re not sure, so we’re going to ask a range of senior business executives to tell us about wisdom and the decision-making making process and whether wisdom plays a part.

Some Questions

We plan to ask senior company executives three questions related to decision-making and record their answers in the space of 10-15 minutes. We shall analyse the answers and report on what we find. We are hopeful that we might discover some keys to wise management decision-making. The three questions:

1. What does wisdom mean for you?
2. We are taught that management decisions rely upon knowledge (technical expertise, data, facts) and a rational approach. In your experience, can you describe how wisdom might add something more to the decision-making process? How does one acquire wisdom?
3. How does one acquire wisdom?

Wisdom Project Survey Method

We aim to ask 30 – 40 executive respondents the question by telephone, by email or face-to-face. Participants will be selected who hold executive responsibility in companies or organisations with turnover ideally in excess of €60 million in the last financial year and we shall aim for as global a representation as a possible.

Respondents will be asked to state their position in the company and their age range: Under 28, 28-45; 46-55; 55+.

Survey period: 16 April – 31 May 2010

Reporting the Results

This survey is the first stage in our enquiry and may form the basis for a second stage survey before results are published.

Relevance to Executives

We expect to be able to learn more about wise judgments in organisational decision-making. We think that we gain insights into the kind of character required to make excellent decisions and how such character might be nurtured in companies and business schools.

Concluding Thought

The neglect, indeed the rejection, of wisdom has gone so far that most of our intellectuals have not even the faintest idea what the term could mean. As a result, they always tend to try and cure a disease by intensifying its causes. The disease having been caused by allowing cleverness to displace wisdom, no amount of clever research is likely to produce a cure. But what is wisdom? Where can it be found? Here we come to the crux of the matter: it can be read about in numerous publications but it can be found only inside oneself. To be able to find it, one has first to liberate oneself from such masters as greed and envy. The stillness follows the liberation – even if only momentary – produces the insights of wisdom which are obtainable in no other way.

E. F. Schumacher, 1973:24¹

¹ E. F. Schumacher, 1973, *Small is Beautiful*, Vintage, London