

# DYNAMICS OF ORGANIZATIONAL WISDOM

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## ABSTRACT

*Neglected till recently in management research, expansion of interest in wisdom and its practical application across a wide range of disciplines is observed. Embrace of the ancient wisdom traditions such as Zen Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, and wider acceptance of spirituality and soul in the workplace exemplify the trend. Facets of wise thought and action are central to burgeoning disciplines such as business ethics, sustainability, transformational leadership, corporate citizenship and social responsibility, and workplace democratization. Built on the principles and practices of organizational learning and knowledge management, but surpassing them in their ability to foster learning, understanding, commitment, and "doing the right thing," organizational wisdom provides an aim worth striving for. This paper identifies and explains important elements of organizational wisdom, and describes their interaction as a dynamic, complex system. Understanding this system illuminates causes of organizational learning problems, permits targeting key sticking points and levers for change, and suggests strategies for more effective learning and the achievement of important performance outcomes.*

## A NEW ERA UNFOLDS

If the last decade of the 20th Century and the early years of the 21st may be termed the era of the learning organization, the period that supersedes it might aptly be termed the era of organizational wisdom; that is, if we can understand and overcome the barriers holding us back. Despite the explosion of research and writing on organizational learning, knowledge management, and related subjects since 1990, there continues to be concern as to how to become a learning organization, exploit intellectual capital, and best value, develop, and get the most out of our human resources. It is not the intent of this paper to exhaustively review or to rehash the organizational learning / learning organization literature, but to provide a working foundation upon which the ideas of organizational wisdom can be developed. A sample of those sources drawn on more heavily includes Argyris (1982; 1991), Argyris and Schön (1978), Garvin (1993), Gorelick, Milton, and April (2004), Griffey (1998), Kim (1994), Lichtenstein (2000), Reynolds and Ablett (1998), Schein (1993; 1999), Senge (1990a; 1990b), Shaw and

Perkins (1992), Shelton and Darling (2003), Tucker, Edmondson, and Spear (2002), Ulrich, Von Glinow, and Jick (1993).

These sources indicate that we have certainly achieved a profound increase in awareness about the need for change and adaptation, and the mechanism viewed as the best solution, learning organizations; but, paradoxically, we have fallen woefully short of becoming them. The components of organizational learning do not tell the story. It is the way they are arranged, fueled, and operate synergistically that explains how organizations learn (or fail to) and what they need to do to achieve greater levels of wisdom and effectiveness.

At the core of the system [model] are a couple of simple elements whose dynamic relationships animate and at least partially explain the organisational learning system and, potentially, wisdom. Effectively contending with context, learning, reflection, and biases, beliefs and assumptions assures organisational learning occurs; it is their interaction that enables organisational learning and converts it to wise thoughts and actions. Without reflection in context, for example, learning is minimised and effectiveness of strategies cannot truly be assessed.

Organizational wisdom transcends organizational learning in its commitment to doing the right thing over doing things right. Doing the right thing continually while contending with immediate crises-and sometimes in opposition to business logic-requires courage, commitment to core values that include the greater good, understanding of the big picture, and a willingness to trade short-term profit or ease with long-term viability. This implies identification with something bigger than self, and may provide a source of meaning only possible when one's self interests have been transcended. It may also mean thinking and acting in unconventional ways, which may open one up to criticism or other attack. The wise individual wears this vulnerability well.

Wisdom is greater than knowledge, intelligence, and experience, three attributes popularly held to comprise wisdom. Our organizations have these already. It is how they are linked and leveraged that makes the difference. The model of organizational wisdom put forward here attempts to show some of the important

linkages amongst these and other elements and how they work together synergistically to promote or inhibit learning and wisdom. Can we not become wise in our thinking and action, we will continue to know about and aspire to become a learning organization, but we will ultimately fail to achieve that which we set out to do: to anticipate and preempt problems and capitalize on potential opportunities; mobilize and engage organizational members; evolve from a reactionary organism to a proactive one; and remain viable and sustainable while serving as stewards to our communities and the environment.

## ANCIENT WISDOM FOR MODERN TIMES

Conscious being and doing are the essence of wisdom. Mindfulness, a concept borrowed from Zen Buddhism, is a state of acute awareness, attentiveness, and perceptiveness in everything going on around oneself, while minimizing the effects of self and ego. Achieving mindfulness involves reducing egoistic barriers to perception, partly achieved by increasing recognition of interpretive filters and biases and other internal processes, such as wants, needs, and defensive tendencies. Similar precepts underlie the learning disability literature, as emphasized by Argyris and Schön (1978), Argyris (1982; 1991) and others. In the model proposed here, consciousness-exploration of the effect and efficacy of ones actions, contributions, and responses-takes the form of reflection (Densten and Gray (2001); Hays (2004a). Knowledge in action through reflection (Schön, 1983) is central to the thesis of this paper. Reflection manifests and contributes to wisdom; and is underscored in much of the literature on learning, wisdom, organizational change and development, and innovation (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1990; Kitchener and Brenner, 1990; Brookfield, 1995; Daudelin, 1996; Griffith and Frieden, 2000; Bierly, Kessler, and Christense, 2000; Shelton and Darling, 2003).

Being in the moment (not unlike Csikszentmihalyi's (1992) characterization of flow)-fully engaged and liberated from self-centered constraints-is at the objective of the Zen, Confucian, and Taoist striving for humility, emptiness, and detachment / non-attachment. When we can honestly admit we have much to learn, we may just have the chance to do so. The metaphor of the empty vessel, for instance, highlights that much can flow into an empty container, while nothing much will enter one who is already full (of him- or herself!) [see, for example, Huang and Lynch (1995) or Bahm's (1992) interpretations of Confucian writings). People who are convinced that they know or are right cannot learn and change; they will not ben-

efit from the multiple viewpoints of others or information available to them that may be discrepant.

When we do not hold on to things, including our beliefs (the idea of "letting go"), we can move on to new and more effective thoughts and behaviors. Non-judgmentalism and tolerance for ambiguity are also key concepts in the wisdom traditions. Parallels to modern learning organization theory and practice are obvious, as are linkages to recent research on wisdom. Shaw and Perkins (1992) tell us that organizations require cultural norms and practices that promote surfacing, examination, and revision of beliefs and assumptions as "Letting go ... is difficult at best. Most of us would rather cling to that which we know than experience the discomfort of embracing a new paradigm" (p. 190; emphasis added). Even the allusion (or illusion) of certainty and correctness can undermine learning and change. The conscious or unconscious need to assert power over others has the same debilitating effect. If employees doubt their own observations and ideas or feel they have no power to change things, they will remain silent. To feign knowledge, wield authority, or dominate may feel necessary at the moment, but is probably unwise in the long run. These and other dynamics are explained by and demonstrated in the systems model of organizational wisdom put forward in this paper.

## WHY NOW?

Investigation of wisdom and its business application, to date, has been minimal. Such neglect is understandable given that wisdom is so hard to define and measure. It might also be the case that organizations are not perceived capable of thinking and acting wisely, or that it is assumed that wisdom and the organizational profit motive and self-interests are antithetical. This notwithstanding, elements of the model such as appreciation for complexity and systemic thinking, teamwork and collaboration, focus on learning and adaptability, and knowing what you know, what you don't know, and what to do about it have everything to do with organizational life and business. This is especially the case in an environment of increasing concern for sustainability, social responsibility, and corporate citizenship, all of which is occurring within a context of accelerating change and competition, blurring boundaries, and uncertainty. The decision maker of today has an even greater challenge than ever before in history. Things happen more quickly and mistakes may have world-wide consequences. Thus, wise thoughts and actions may be more relevant and necessary than ever before. It makes good sense to learn what we can about wisdom and emulate wise thinkers and those who act wisely.

In many respects, what has been sought by the proponents of organizational learning-but proven elusive-is embodied in wisdom. As numerous researchers have noted, despite continued and intense focus on organizational learning, and much popular appeal, it has largely remained an ideal, not a practical achievement (Shelton and Darling, 2003; Reynolds and Ablett, 1998; Gorelick, Milton, and April, 2004; Shaw and Perkins, 1992). In turning to organizational learning, executives and advocates are attempting to improve performance and continually improve and innovate (Baker and Sinkula, 2002), become more adaptive and change-able (Griffey, 1998), learn how they learn and become better at learning (Cavaleri and Fearon, 1996), reap the most out of teams and collaborative work groups (Hut and Molleman, 1998), and exploit the lessons of experience and deploy them across the organization (Ulrich, von Glinow, and Jick, 1993).

It is time to consider wisdom in the organizational context because organizations (and many of the people who populate them) do not think and act wisely; and they need to. Swain (1999), for example, recently observed:

The lack of strategic direction and dysfunctional activities undertaken at enormous cost in terms of wasted human resources and money by organizations should provide sobering lessons in terms of organizational learning and business education. Never before have so many employees had formal business education and management qualifications. How then could the past decade show evidence of so many managers clearly having little strategic appreciation of how to manage an organization in order to achieve long-term sustainable advantage? (p. 31)

If we accept the premise that organizations must learn and change, and must be concerned with the future as well as today-that is, they must think and act wisely, and they are not-then an exploration of wisdom is essential. While wisdom is a concept that has had little attention in the management literature, facets of wisdom though not necessarily referred to as such, have been and continue to be explored. These include Knowledge Management (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Hansen, Nohria, and Tierney (1999; Thatch and Woodman (1994)), learning and learning disabilities (Argyris, 1982; 1991; Levitt and March, 1988; Lyles, 1994), decision-making and planning (de Geus, 1988; Mintzberg, 1993, 1994, 1996), complexity theory and systems thinking (Gleick, 1987; Goldstein, 1994; Lichtenstein, 2000), positive conflict (Tjosvold, 1992; Pascale, 1991), leadership (Senge, 1990; Swain, 1999; Densten and Gray, 2001; Prewitt, 2003),

emotional intelligence (Goleman; 1994; Cooper and Sawaf; 1996), innovation (Lin, 2004; Baker and Sinkula, 2002) and organizational development and change (Gill, 2003; Hays; in press), including, and most pertinently, the rich terrain of organizational learning introduced previously.

While independently astute, constructive, and often practical, these varied constructs and their attendant processes and practices have not been productively integrated. While the integration task is larger than any of us singly could hope to describe, much less accomplish in practice, these streams of research strive to achieve similar ends. It seems reasonable to think that a practical and effective synthesis could generate even greater returns in terms of learning, innovation, and change. In advancing the proposed dynamic model of organizational wisdom the author hopes to reveal some of the synergies amongst these varied disciplines and topics, and initiate further dialogue and research.

## WISDOM

Wisdom is essentially doing the right thing. The wise act judiciously and prudently in the appreciation of the fullness of context, respond to complex problems in contentious circumstances in a far-sighted and appropriate manner, and care about and prepare for a future that matters. To neglect the fullness of context and limit our horizons is unwise.

A wise thought, or wisdom, is generally held to be a function of great intelligence, a wealth of experience, and conviction in values that include serving "the greater good" (Baltes and Staudinger, 2000; Birren and Fisher, Sternberg, 1998). Character traits of the wise person include compassion, empathy, altruism, sagacity, prudence (Orwoll and Perlmutter; 1990), and others, including the ability to see a situation from multiple perspectives and to appreciate the consequences of actions on the future lives and welfare of those people and communities he or she serves. Wise individuals are deeply self-aware (Kitchener and Brenner, 1990; Korac-Kakabadse, Korac-Kakabadse, and Kouzmin, 2001): they know their strengths and their shortcomings; they are sensitive to their own needs, wants, and emotional states. While deeply committed to and personally responsible for "the common good," wise individuals have the capacity to detach or "distance" themselves (in terms of satisfying their own egos and self-interests) from the problems confronting them and, thus, can operate objectively and with an open mind. These attributes work in concert to permit exceptional and encompassing consideration of the "big picture" (Cammock, 2003) as well as

acute situations, leading to or enabling effective problem-solving and dispute resolution, decision-making and planning, and implementation.

Wise individuals are thought to be few. But we are at least potentially wiser than we may know. Traditionally, the sage was the exclusive carrier of wisdom, and there were not many to be found (Baltes and Staudinger, 2000); however, they note, sages or the wisest of persons offer exemplars to emulate. They add that the more we know about wisdom and how it develops, and the more we promote its development, the greater the likelihood that we may follow in the footsteps of those who have taught us, inspiring in word and deed. Few amongst us would claim to fulfill the description of wisdom proffered in the previous paragraph. This may be a good sign, however. Humility—one of the terms omitted from the foregoing, but also frequently cited to characterize wise individuals (sages)—is thought to play a major role in acquiring and demonstrating wisdom; for, as the Zen master Shunryu Suzuki (2002; p. 21) tells us, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few."

Bartering for his life, a sage in a traditional Sufi parable admonishes a powerful leader in his day:

The first truth... is that you imagine yourself to be a seeker of truth. The second truth is that you only wish to hear the truth as you currently conceive it. The third truth is that you will only know the truth when you know yourself to be ignorant (Van de Weyer, 2004; p. 102; emphasis added).

While [exceptional] intelligence and wisdom are often used synonymously, they are not the same. One may be very intelligent and, yet, not be or act wisely. Intelligence enables us to think, analyze, and solve problems within specific and known contexts. Wisdom transcends typical problems and known contexts. The wise person can generate useful solutions in novel circumstances, limited not by what he or she has learned through previous study or experience. Previous learning and experience may bias and limit understanding of context (reality in its fullness and things as they are). The wise individual is able to see with clarity into complex situations, understand dynamic relationships concerning cause and effect, and make decisions or take actions that serve the interests of the common good.

What enables such profound thought and action are mediating factors related mostly to values (Item 24 on the diagram), a life orientation that esteems and prac-

tices compassion, loving-kindness, consideration for all life, tolerance, and a oneness or unity with all elements of our universe (Griffey, 1998; Shelton and Darling, 2003; Wheatley, 1994), a sense of soul (Cammock, 2003), and empathy (Goleman, 1998). This may sound lofty and irrelevant to the business and its objectives and practices. But perhaps expanding objectives to encompass contribution to the greater good (or at least a reduction in harm) is just what is needed to make our organizations friendlier and more meaningful places to work. Research cited in this paragraph and others (Sendjaya and Sarros, 2002; Sarros, 2002; Greenleaf, 1977) shows an increasing awareness of and commitment to higher ideals, stewardship and service, and a greater appreciation for the consequences of our actions.

Some researchers into wisdom emphasize its practical nature. It seems reasonable, however, to assume that one can learn and even be wise without direct and immediate indication of it. In fact, three types of wisdom have been historically characterized, as summarized by Robinson (1990): Sophia - a contemplative, more introspective search for truth, which is probably most like the spiritual wisdom traditions, and where wisdom is least likely to be most blatant; Phronesis - a practical kind of wisdom as measured by day-to-day effectiveness; and Episteme - a more scientific, rationally-grounded type of wisdom.

## ORGANIZATIONAL WISDOM AS A SYSTEM

Figure 1 depicts organizational wisdom as a complex, dynamic system. This particular kind of diagram is known as a relationship map and is the author's version of a causal loop diagram. Such maps are characteristic of soft systems thinking (Checkland, 1985) with its focus on the construction and use of systems models to explore complex problems and promote learning (see also Senge, 1990a), and have been used to portray aspects of learning and related dynamic management relationships (Hays and Winter, 2004). These models are not expected to capture reality completely, but to help managers better describe their unique situations. In the process, their perceptions about how things operate are revealed, and their biases, beliefs, and assumptions may be surfaced and challenged.

While evolving and expected to change as a result of further testing, research, dialogue, and feedback, the model presented here currently is comprised of 24 elements. While inter-dependent, the elements each uniquely influence the development and expression of organizational wisdom. The individual elements are

listed in Table 1. Due to space limitations, only those variables most central to organizational wisdom and that push the limits of organizational learning are thoroughly explained. These core elements are bolded in Table 1. Three points, here, deserve emphasis:

- ✓ Each element is important to how the system operates, so must be individually understood.
- ✓ All variables must be understood to be acting in concert and synergistically within and as the system.
- ✓ A thorough understanding of one or even a handful of the elements cannot fully explain why organizational learning fails and wisdom cannot be achieved.

1. Emphasis on Learning and Adaptability.
2. Domain / Content Training and Education.
3. Teamwork and Collaboration.
4. Appreciation for Complexity.
5. Knowledge.
6. General Approach to Problem-Solving.
7. Experience.
8. Learning and Thinking Styles.
9. Systems Thinking.
10. Biases, Beliefs, and Assumptions.
11. Context.
12. Learning.
13. Reflection.
14. Wise Thoughts.
15. Effective Actions and Strategies.
16. Successful Outcomes.
17. What Works; What Doesn't.
18. Perceived Value of Reflection.
19. Opportunity.
20. Competence.
21. Confidence
22. Motivation.
23. Incentives.
24. Values.

**Table 1.** The 24 Elements Comprising the Organizational Wisdom System.

Coming to an understanding of the dynamics of organizational wisdom involves identifying and establishing relationships amongst key variables. The 24 variables introduced above are complex constructs, definition and measurement of which is difficult and uncertain at best. The model shows both detail and dynamic complexity (Senge, 1990b); detail referring to the high number of variables and dynamic to subtlety and indirectness of the relationships amongst system elements. Relationships amongst the factors are dynamic, non-linear, and complex [see Miner and Mezias (1996) and Thomas, Sussman, and Henderson

(2001)]; capturing them is as much an art or an intuitive, speculative process as it is a science. The model incorporates the theory, practice, and philosophy of wisdom and related streams, with the objective to begin to reveal the complexity and reality of organizational learning and wisdom.

There was no intended, predetermined logic or science to the arrangement of the factors comprising the dynamic relationship map of wisdom presented here. The design emerged from an initial batch of a dozen factors surfacing from review of related literatures and discussion with interested colleagues. Three main types of literature were reviewed. First and foremost was modern management literature, primarily drawing on that focusing on organizational learning.

Also mined was literature on wisdom from the disciplines of psychology (notably Baltes and Staudinger, 1993, 2000; Birren and Fisher, 1990; Kitchener and Brenner, 1990; and Sternberg, 1998, 2003), philosophy (Arnoud and LeBon, 2000; Korak-Kakabase, Korac-Kakabase, and Kouzmin, 2001; Robinson, 1990), and human development (Cooper and Sawaf, 1996; Gardner, 1993; Kolb, 1984). Selected writings on wisdom and the wise from traditional Confucian, Sufi, Taoist, and Zen Buddhist sources were also reviewed. Additionally, the author's personal experiences with Native American teachers provided context for some of the ideas incorporated here. While each of these streams adds unique perspective and value on wisdom, there is an amazing amount of overlap across these sources. As examples, similarities and complements are seen in the emphasis on:

- ✓ Seeing the big picture; separating details from principles or trends, and symptoms from problems and causes, attending to the few issues and factors that really matter.
- ✓ Understanding complexity in problems and situations, particularly from multiple vantage points and through the eyes of diverse stakeholders.
- ✓ Recognizing the limits of knowledge and knowing, including our inability to see reality as it is, but as colored by our own lenses; acknowledging the nature, affects, and possibilities of multiple realities.

Doing the right thing—that which serves the greater good and does the least overall harm; minimizing self-interest; the value of honesty—even when it hurts.

While wisdom is all around us, it is seldom dealt with academically. If investigated scientifically, it seems to lose something. Perhaps the tendency to narrow defini-

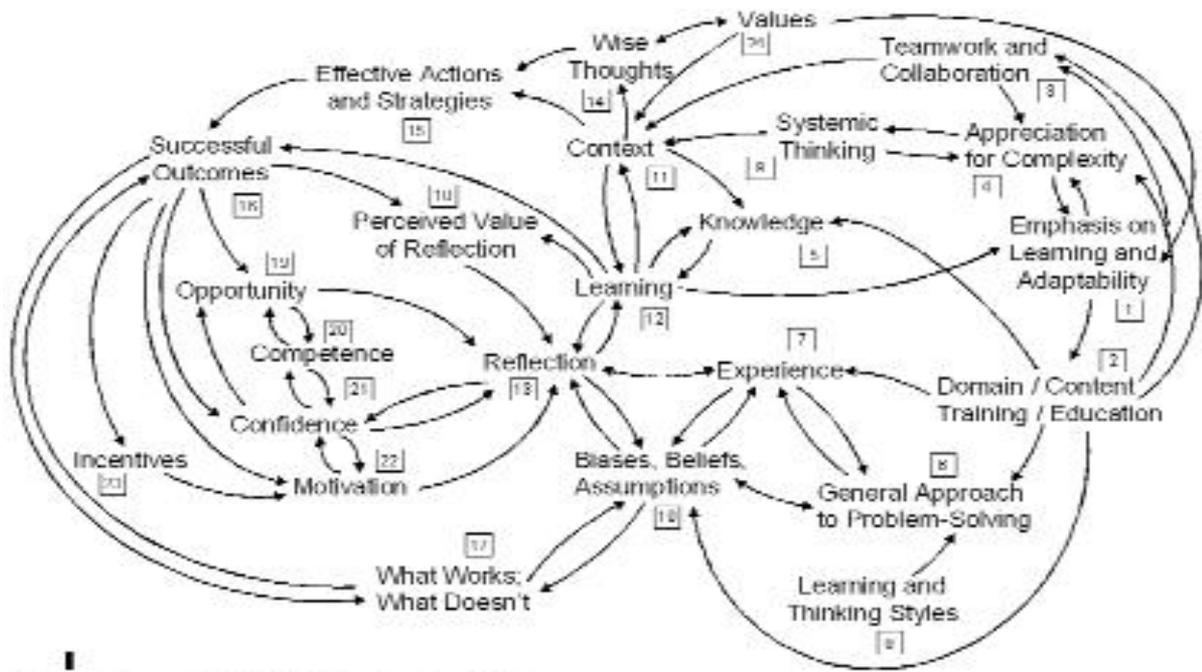


Figure 1. Dynamic Model of Organisational Wisdom.

tions and scope of wisdom derives from a reasonable concern for objective measurement and as a matter of precision. The organizational learning / organizational development, change, and innovation literature reminds us of our positivist scientific heritage and emphasizes that logic, rationality, predictability, control and so on are necessary to management and improvement, but insufficient to learning and change (see, for example, Stata, 1989, or Gill, 2003). Chaos theory, quantum physics, and Zen Buddhism tell us about the illusory nature of control, and the value of unpredictability, emergence, and "letting go" [see Goldstein, 1994; Lichtenstein (2000); or Hensler, Edgeman, and Guerrero-Cusumano; (2000). The case is often and compellingly made that what we see is not what is.

As both practitioner and academic, the author supports Ray Stata's admonition to universities "...to set aside their preference for tidy 'academic research,' and, instead, confront messy, real-life management issues (1989; p. 73). Mostly what we see is messy, complicated, and, at best, imprecisely predictable (as exemplified by Figure 1...). Often what is not worth talking about, really is; what we take for granted, shouldn't be. Our intelligence and our egos tend to get in the way of wisdom.

## DYNAMIC MODEL OF ORGANISATIONAL WISDOM

### Introduction and General Character

The dynamic model of organizational wisdom pro-

posed here focuses on reflection as the mechanism that links and promotes learning, exploiting experience and building useful knowledge. Reflection is a process, discipline, and skill that is relatively simple to learn and adopt. While there are reasons individuals may discount or neglect reflection (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Senge, 1990b), the value it can have is indisputable (Hays, 2004a).

Learning (Item 12) is conspicuous by virtue of its location smack in the middle of the diagram. Wisdom (indicated by Wise Thoughts (14) and Effective Actions and Strategies (15) is not an "end state," but an evolving condition continually fed by learning and mediated by Context (11). A core characteristic of the wise is a passion for knowledge, coupled with an acknowledgement of how little is known, which motivates learning. Add to this an on-going mindfulness of the learning process in which one is engaged, including one's own styles, tendencies, weaknesses, and learning objectives and requirements, and the result may be continuous learning and improvements in learning to learn. Mindfulness is promoted through reflection.

Wisdom implies a synergy amongst intelligence, knowledge, and experience. Organizations generally have these elements, but lack synergy. What organizations need are improved processes that promote the synergy amongst intelligence, knowledge, and experience and allow employees at all levels to exploit the synergy. Reflective thinking and learning is one such

process, especially given full appreciation of context that includes important shared values.

## Brief Walk-Through of the Model

### 1. *Emphasis on Learning and Adaptability.*

Organizations are increasingly realizing that they must rapidly learn and adapt. They must not only respond to a continuously changing, dynamic, and complex environment, but they must ready themselves for threats and opportunities with which they have not previously had to contend. They must become change-able and forward-thinking (Lin, 2004). Emphasis on learning and adaptability is embodied in a set of cultural conditions operating dynamically to inhibit or promote learning and change. Stata (1989) reminds us that, "The values and culture of an organization have a significant impact on the learning process and on how effectively a company can adapt and change" (p. 70). The values orientation and culture of the organization include beliefs, expectations, and practices governing strategic priorities, organizational initiatives and particularly how they are implemented, associated systems, mechanics, and processes, and notions as what people believe is important, how things are done and who does them, how and what people are encouraged to learn and do, opportunities provided, and who gets rewarded and for what (Hays and Winter, 2004)

**2. *Domain / Content Training and Education.*** The content and emphasis of domain-specific training and education promotes skills and knowledge held to be of critical importance to the organization, including the way individuals in the organization, and the organization as a general rule, approach and solve problems. In so doing it may reassure senior managers that organizational capability is being developed or maintained, and may also achieve the perception that the organization is investing in its future and in its employees. At the same time, such focus may provide a false sense of capability and limit consideration of other competencies that may be needed. These dynamics are inferred by the loop to and through Biases, Beliefs, and Assumptions.

**3. *Teamwork and Collaboration.*** Building teamwork and collaboration is a set of strategies to promote dialogue across organizations, expose and explore cross-functional differences and exploit diversity, and foster unity of effort, all of which can improve learning and innovation (Thompson, 2004). There is no question that teams and teamwork are on the rise in all types of businesses (Campion, Medsker, and Higgs, 1993; Cohen and Bailey, 1997), essentially because teams are believed to promote productivity / performance, as well as employee satisfaction. Teams also comply

with emerging thought and practices in worker empowerment and autonomy (Hut and Molleman, 1998; Kirkman and Rosen, 2001).

In the model, the link between teamwork and collaboration and context suggests that within cross-functional teams lies more combined and fuller knowledge of the organization and its environment. Appreciation for complexity may result from the very function of working together in teams or attempting to collaborate. The challenges and conflicts that arise from the diversity (Jehn, 1995) serve to remind people that everyone is different and have complementary skills and perspectives. Drawn from diverse areas, members of cross-functional teams bring unique (if partial) views of the organization and its environment to the teams. These multiple views are what allows better problem-solving and more effective decision-making (that is, if the challenge and conflict of diversity can be harnessed). The rich literature on positive conflict (C+), exemplified by Tjosvold (1991) and Pascale (1991) covers this dynamic. It is also believed that such diversity or multiplicity of views is essential for innovation (Lin, 2004; Nadler and Hibino, 1994).

**4. *Appreciation for Complexity.*** Awareness that problems are not often as simple as we would like them to be and that arriving at and implementing effective solutions to complex problems may require much more investment than we are willing and able to give comes from and contributes to systemic thinking. That is, the more we know about and appreciate complexity, the more we tend to think systemically. While emphasis on learning and adaptability does not automatically lead to appreciation for complexity, appreciation for complexity (and systems thinking) are foundational elements of the learning organization (Senge, 1990; Stacey, 1996; Wheatley, 1994): simple solutions for complex problems are few.

**5. *Knowledge.*** Knowledge is integral to wisdom and plays a central, but perhaps surprisingly different relationship to wisdom than is generally considered. Knowledge can both promote and limit learning. Learning and Knowledge mutually influence one another. As learning increases, for example, knowledge increases. In the opposite direction, knowledge impacts learning a bit differently, influencing both what is learned and how learning occurs. What is known and how one has come to know determine what we look for, what we see (Dearborn and Simon, 1958; Walsh, 1988), whether or not we believe something we have observed is important, whether or not how we think the way we are approaching the task is right for us, and so on.

Knowledge does not directly lead to wise thoughts or effective actions and strategies. We may all have known or observed people who are very knowledgeable in one or more discipline but who have not acted wisely or seem "clueless" in some areas of their lives. The same dynamic that occurs at the individual level may also operate organizationally.

Individual and organizational knowledge are different and must be distinguished. There may be many knowledgeable people in an organization, but the organization, itself, will only be knowledgeable and capable (able to capitalize upon that distributed knowledge) to the extent that it can centralize, organize, and transfer knowledge and skills efficiently and effectively amongst its many members and other stakeholders within and across business units (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Stata, 1989; Swain, 1999).

**6. General Approach to Problem-Solving.** Problem-solving approaches derive in part from Domain / Content Training and Education. Preferential patterns may also form over time, as suggested by Kolb (1984), Lazear (1991), and others. Importantly, our approach to problem-solving influences experience as well. Our training, education, and previous experience condition us to attend to and act on certain phenomena over others; some observations will get through our relevance filters; others won't (see, for example, Griffey, 1998). This is influenced by our Biases, Beliefs, and Assumptions, which are further defined by our experience! Tucker, Edmondson, and Spear (2002) found that the majority of employees predominantly use a lower order of problem solving (similar to Argyris' single-loop learning), perhaps because they are driven by immediacy and urgency to deal with crises as they occur and "get on with their business." Such a natural tendency reduces symptoms of problems and is self-reinforcing; but undermines consideration of systemic issues, patterns of behavior, and long-term consequences. Higher-order problem solving (double-loop learning) does not occur.

**7. Experience.** Experience is generally held to be a good thing. While for the purposes of this model, experience and knowledge are treated separately, it is easy to accept that experience connotes accumulated knowledge with respect to practical concerns or in certain domains. Experience does not directly or automatically lead to broader knowledge. It can be, and perhaps often is, an important contributor to knowledge, but is not in and of itself sufficient. Experience can be bad, because how and what we experience may reinforce bad habits and counter-productive behavior (Pralhad and Bettis, 1986).

Experience can lead to both increasing knowledge and to wisdom, but primarily through reflection. A more experienced person is not necessarily a wise person, although a wise individual may possess a wealth of experience and is generally held to do so (Baltes, Staudinger, Maercker, and Smith, 1995). And, while age and maturity often correlate with people thought wise, we know through experience that a person may be wise beyond his or her years.

**8. Learning and Thinking Styles.** Knowing about learning and thinking styles and understanding the implications for individual and team are important because of the influence they have on problem-solving and decision-making. Awareness of differences in learning and thinking styles helps one place within context the assertions, speculations, and actions of others in problem-solving and decision-making situations. Also importantly, diversity is key contributor to creativity and robustness of solutions to new or complex problems; that is, if synergy is attained amongst diverse perspective, preference, and concerted action.

**9. Systems Thinking.** The more we accept that situations are complex and involved, and the more equipped we are to deal with complexity, the better our decisions and solutions are likely to be (Shelton and Darling, 2003). System thinking begins with the realization that any problem or challenge occurs within and is an integral part of a system. Bringing systems thinking to problem-solving and decision-making concerns identifying and working with relationships and inter-dependencies amongst elements in a particular system. Unfortunately, a lot of our current problems and failed solutions can be explained by our predilection to simplify (Pralhad and Bettis, 1986). Our typical response to problems is to attack the most painful symptom and to select a remedy that seems to most directly and immediately relieve the pain. As we often discover with palliatives, the headache may go away temporarily, but its cause does not.

**10. Biases, Beliefs, and Assumptions.** Biases, beliefs, and assumptions may be thought of as a set of lenses through which we observe and interpret the world and our position in it. Each individual will have his or her own unique set of lenses formed inexorably over his or her lifetime, including current circumstances and organizational role (Kim, 1994; Thompson, 1996).

This astute and provocative quote from Zukav, cited in Shelton and Darling (2003, p. 355), highlights the intricacy, subtlety, and influence of biases, beliefs, and assumptions:

Reality is what we take to be true. What we take to be true is what we believe. What we believe is based upon our perceptions. What we perceive depends upon what we look for. What we look for depends on what we think. What we think depends on what we perceive. What we perceive determines what we believe. What we believe determines what we take to be true. What we take to be true is our reality.

Our thinking and behavior often operate in this circular, self-perpetuating manner, persistently living out our subjective, incomplete view of the world and understanding of problems and their causes, and applying solutions that by definition are limited and likely inadequate.

Each organization and sub-culture within it will have a collective mindset that colors and focuses the lenses of its members. What may be difficult to fully comprehend and accept is that what we see and experience is not a complete and accurate picture. "We do not see things as they are; we see them as we are," Anais Nin is credited with saying (emphasis added). The Talmud is also said to be a source of this statement (Lieberman and Liberman, 2001). Taoist and Zen philosophies further inform us that all observations and beliefs are fundamentally personal opinion, even regarding our own existence; that is, they cannot be anything except interpretations through our own lenses. Coming to see reality (things as they are) is one of the major goals of Zen Buddhism and is a foundation for and indicator of enlightenment (Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde, 1990; Fletcher and Scott, 2001). Critical to this capacity are the abilities to distance oneself from the phenomenon being observed and view it objectively (this is known as detachment) and to see situations from multiple perspectives (which is similar to empathy) (Kegan, 1995; Mezirow, 1990).

**11. Context.** Context includes all factors relevant within a period of time. The potential range of contextual factors is essentially infinite, but includes such elements and considerations as stakeholders, their sentiments, and their relative influence; resources available, physical and mental; competing and complementary priorities; competitors' strengths, and so on. Apprehended in its fullness or not, the context of any complex situation consists of highly- and moderately-relevant factors, as well as factors that may truly be, or be perceived to be, irrelevant. The discerning thinker may be the one who best grasps what is and what is not relevant. Individuals and the larger organization learn more about themselves and their environment as understanding of context increases. Of relevance is discovering more about what is, and what is not

known, what the organization is and is not capable of, and so on.

A wise act is a deliberate one that concerns the common good; it serves interests greater than the self. Senge (1990b) writes:

Leaders engaged in building learning organizations naturally feel part of a larger purpose that goes beyond their organization. They are part of changing the way businesses operate ... from a conviction that their efforts will produce more productive organizations, capable of achieving higher levels of organizational success and personal satisfaction than more traditional organizations (p. 13).

Implied also is that the context is understood in its breadth and depth. That is, a wise decision is one taken with consideration of complexity of the situation. The system is the context. Tying this to leadership, Petrick, Scherer, Brodzinski, Quinn, and Ainina (1999) write that "Excellent global leaders... are able to understand complex issues from different strategic perspectives (p. 60) and "exercise[e] balanced judgment in strategic decision-making" (p. 65). A wise decision would, for example, consider the positions of various stakeholders and the consequences of action on all stakeholder groups, including future generations (Petrick, et al., 1999)

**12. Learning.** Learning is a vast field, touching on and drawing from many disciplines, notably education and psychology, and including sociology and anthropology. Increasingly, learning has become a subject in management science, as well, and has been central to the study and practice of Organizational Development since its beginnings [see, Hendry, 1996; Lundberg, 1989; Mintzberg and Westley, 1992; Van de Ven and Poole, 1995.

Knowledge influences both what is learned and how learning occurs. In some respects, the more we know, the more we can come to know (learn). This is because we can more easily integrate new material into more encompassing frameworks, like having more drawers to put things in. Also, the more we have learned, that is, actively accumulated knowledge, the easier it may be to learn. Over time, we hone our learning skills. These two advantages can operate to our disadvantage, as well, unfortunately. What is known and how one has come to know may narrow what we look for and limit what we see (Argyris, 1991). Over time, we may develop myopia in our thinking, conditioned by our prior Knowledge and Experience and how we obtained it.

The more greatly we are aware of our biases, beliefs, and assumptions, and the more effectively we continually test out their validity, the more proficiently we will learn. Mezirow (1994) notes that dialogue-central to communication and learning-is one way to critically examine what we do, how we do it, and more importantly, why? Such dialogue should target assumptions and beliefs through what he calls "critical premise reflection." Collaboratively constructing a relationship diagram such as the one proposed here to elucidate wisdom in the organizational context is one technique to promote such consideration of biases, beliefs, and assumptions. Supposition-even if wrong-is okay as long as it leads to further debate, dialogue, clarification, and improved understanding.

**13. Reflection.** Reflection and reflective practices appear to be becoming more popular and are figuring in topics from leadership and leadership development to organizational learning (Densten and Gray, 2001; Lichtenstein, 2000; Mezirow (1990; 1994; Schön, 1983; 1987). Citing research by Daudelin (1996), Griffith and Frieden (2000), and others, Hays (2004a) notes that reflection is the active and on-going practice of thinking on material, problems, situations, and experiences and their meaning and relation to self. This involves surfacing and exploring theories, beliefs, and assumptions that contribute to understanding, problem-solving, and decision-making. The reflector is asked to put him- or herself fully "in the picture," as a participating, interacting, and contributing agent to dynamics within a given system or problem context.

Reflection often has the connotation of a passive kind of thought, as invoked by words (processes) such as contemplation, rumination, meditation, and musing. While these terms do apply, in this context, reflection is a more active and deliberate process. In fact, deliberation may be used interchangeably with reflection. Active or passive, reflection requires a "time out." That is, reflection is unlikely, or minimally effective, when one is "caught up" in a stream of work activity, decision-making pressure, or conflict (Easterby-Smith, 1990; Thatchenkery, 1996). The inability (or unwillingness) to find time and space to reflect is part of a vicious cycle that precludes wise thoughts and effective strategies and actions. Specifically, as reflection diminishes, the opportunity to learn reduces. As learning is minimized, mistakes, accidents, and repeated failures increase or continue to occur, negatively impacting successful outcomes, and increasing chaos, confusion, and crisis-fighting, further reducing wise, or prudent, thoughts, decisions, plans, and actions. As effective actions and strategies erode, successful outcomes reduce, which places further pressure on the system.

Reflection (as in reflect) obviously has a sense of looking back, as in reviewing a process or actions leading to a particular outcome. This is a relevant view on reflection, as we may learn through critical, but open-minded review of events, interactions, actions-responses, and our respective roles associated with them, including whether or not and how we are learning [Schön (as discussed in Lichtenstein, 2000)]. As used here, however, reflection also has a sense of looking forward. Lin (2003) states that organisations must have hindsight (reviewing or reflecting back), insight (that acuity and perspicacity into complex problems and situations), and foresight (thinking ahead, planning and preparing for the unknowable; understanding the long-term consequences of actions today). Each of these is a valid domain for reflection.

The wise person is a reflective person (Kitchener and Brenner, 1990). By extension, the wise organization is a reflective one. While perhaps under-emphasized in the management literature, the contributing role of reflection in organizational learning has found support (Nonaka, 1994; Lichtenstein, 2000; Densten and Gray, 2001).

**14. Wise Thoughts.** If wisdom can be defined as acting prudently in the appreciation of the fullness of context, then wise thoughts are the result of context, learning, and reflection. Both knowledge and intelligence are contributors to wisdom, as are values. Experience is also related to wisdom and is generally accepted to be a major contributor to wisdom. Sternberg (2003) notes that wisdom requires knowledge, but more of the kind acquired in life experience, not school learning or erudition. As has been said, however, there is a big difference between twenty years of experience and one year of experience repeated twenty times. Breadth of experience counts, but, more importantly is what one does with the experience; in other words, how one incorporates it and learns and changes as a result. This is the central role played by reflection (Sharratt and Field, 1993).

**15. Effective Actions and Strategies.** It may be difficult to determine where wise thoughts break off and effective actions and strategies begin. Certainly, decision-making and planning are needed before effective actions can be carried out, and these are only relative to and can only be effective within a particular Context. Decision-making and planning techniques may be analytical, thorough, and methodical; but they may not be wise. Wisdom is brought to bear in the way context is understood and embraced, and the actions that ensue. Values play a large part in this. For example, if a leader accepts stewardship of his or her community, then

long-term consequences and sustainability are more salient than short-term profit or ease. A more practical example is the decision by a leader to invest in developing people and creating a supportive work environment as part of on-going initiatives. Here, some impedance to immediate progress is accepted in return for future capability. Adopting a team-based approach to continuous improvement could be expected to drain resources and require time to ramp up before returning dividends. But employees will be able to use the problem-solving, decision-making, planning, implementation, and evaluation skills they develop on a wide range of projects, long into the future.

**16. Successful Outcomes.** Everybody likes success. Success is rewarding and motivating; it validates what we have done and encourages us to do more. It can be a two-edged sword, however, cutting deeply when we are mistaken about what led to success. Failure can pose the same problem when we fail to recognize what complex of events and actions truly led to failing (Argyris, 1982,1991; Kitchener and Brenner, 1990; Nystrom and Starbuck, 1984; Shaw and Perkins, 1992; Thompson, 1996; Tucker, Edmondson, and Spear, 2002). In either case, we fail to learn or we learn the wrong thing. The implications of this is that we might persist in certain behaviors and strategies believing they lead to success, when they may actually have little instrumentally to do with it. On the other hand, we might tend to discard one strategy after another to remediate problem performance, not really knowing what is causing us to fail. This is one area where reflecting can make a substantial difference. Sufficient time and skill in reflecting will increase awareness of the affect of biases, beliefs, and assumptions on our thinking and will increase Learning, thus, ultimately, feeding successful outcomes.

The good thing about reflection is that is it useful in conditions of success, failure, and moderate performance. One can learn from an open-minded critique of any of these situations. Naturally, organizations would more likely critically evaluate poor performance or a crisis than they would a success or sustained superior performance. And while these investigations may occur, more often than not they are probably more critical and analytical than reflective. The two views may be dichotomized as to find and correct the fault versus to learn what we can from the failure.

**17. What Works; What Doesn't.** What works and what doesn't is often the result of the learning from experience people talk so much about. Feedback suggests do more, do less, and do something differently. Our interpretations (taken as givens) of what works

and what doesn't are heavily influenced by and perhaps inseparable from biases, beliefs, and assumptions. Critical reflection should help us to better understand and be more conscious about our behavior and its affects.

**18. Perceived Value of Reflection.** Perceived value of reflection is merely a function of successful outcomes where success is at least partially attributed to reflection and the learning it promotes. Learning may be experienced as its own reward, thus reinforcing and increasing the perceived value of reflection, when the connection to reflection is made. Emphasizing progress and achievements brought about by reflection will increase its perceived value and contribution.

**19. Opportunity.** Opportunity encompasses access to and participation in the affairs of the organization and the running of the business. This includes problem-solving, decision-making, planning, implementation, training and professional development. This is about individual learning and development, and organizational capability-building. Opportunity is also linked to positions and tasks that are perceived by employees as interesting and meaningful, and offer greater levels of responsibility and autonomy. Commitment to and direction of opportunity relate to the organisation's values and philosophy, most relevantly to its emphasis on learning and adaptability and / or domain / content training and education.

**20. Competence.** Competence comes from all of the deliberate and inherent developmental opportunities to which an employee or team has access, including domain / content training / education, on the job training / experience and more general professional development, both inside and outside of the organization. As competence increases, opportunity increases. Those who "can" are recognized and advanced. In the typical, traditional organization this tendency concentrates confidence and competence in a minority, undermining capability-building across a wider spectrum of employees. This unintended consequence of a seemingly reasonable preference has been described elsewhere as the "White Knight Syndrome" (Hays, 2005 in press). The "white knight" is called upon or volunteers when adversity (in the guise of crisis) rears its head. The majority of employees are prevented (or, in some cases, hold themselves back) from doing battle and acquiring essential seasoning. For the sake of efficiency and to protect employees, insidious white knight behavior dampens ownership and restrains capability-building.

**21. Confidence.** As Competence increases so does

confidence. One can go forward more securely when one feels capable. Organizational supports that enable the employee to feel equipped and empowered to do the job must be the focus of constant attention. The degree to which the environment is supportive of performance and development and equips employees to continually improve is probably a direct result of the emphasis on learning and adaptability.

**22. Motivation.** An increase in confidence positively influences motivation. This is a consequence of the individual believing that he or she can accomplish a task, that is, possesses requisite skills and talents, and has access to enabling conditions and resources. While motivation, as shown in the diagram, is fed both by successful outcomes directly (success is inherently rewarding) and through Incentives, such motivation may be thwarted in the absence of confidence, competence, and opportunity.

**23. Incentives.** Introduction of reflection as a part of the way we do things here, may need to be accompanied by potent incentives to get people to begin practicing reflection and incorporating the discipline into day to day work. They will not know how to reflect, and may find it odd or confronting. It will not be a part of the normal routine, and may seem to come at great cost to typical measures of and attitudes regarding productivity. Employees will not have, yet, experienced the benefits of reflecting, and may need to be sold on its value. To be effective, reflection may need to be formally taught, and supported by the culture and its complex of organizational systems, practices, and values (Hays and Winter, 2004).

**24. Values.** Values permeate the entire model, as they both define and emerge from the organization's culture, itself. Values play a significant role in the wisdom system, both in terms of how it is enacted and how it is perceived. This is substantiated in much of the empirical and conceptual explorations of wisdom, where there is converging consensus concerning values characteristic of the wise individual. These include selflessness, or at least regard for others as well as self, compassion, objectivity and fairness, sound judgment, integrity, patience, tolerance, altruism, benevolence, thoughtfulness, and equanimity (Baltes and Staudinger, 2000, Birren and Fisher, 1990; Dreher, 2002; Goleman, 1998; Greenleaf, 1977; Kitchener and Brenner, 1990; Korac-Kakabase, Korac-Kakabase, and Kouzmin, 2001, Orwoll and Perlmutter, 1990).

Values influence emphasis on learning and adaptability. Presumably, those who think wisely would also want to create an environment in which everyone

becomes more capable, effective, and mature (approaches wisdom). The wise individual does not "lord it over others," but seeks to emancipate them.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing presented a tentative model of organizational wisdom. The model identifies 24 elements comprising wisdom and their dynamic relationships. Existing models of the learning organization (Shaw and Perkins, 1992; Reynolds and Ablett, 1998; Schwandt and Marquardt, 2000), fail to capture the essence of learning and interaction amongst key ingredients and processes. The configuration chosen here draws on and augments previous explicit models and depicts narrative attributes and descriptions in the learning organization literature (Senge, 1990; Garvin, 1993; Ulrich, von Glinow, and Jick, 1993; Walderssee, 1997; Griffey, 1998; Shelton and Darling, 2003).

In constructing and describing the model and the relationships amongst its components, the author has drawn on a wide range of disciplines, touching upon extant literatures covering learning and Human Resource Development, motivation and reinforcement, teamwork and collaboration, culture, perception, systems thinking and complexity theory, reflection, and others, including wisdom itself. The elements or variables included in the model each represent major focus areas of study; there is no way that a paper or model such as this could do these respective disciplines justice. So, forbearance is sought from the many experts in these fields who could rightly censure and find lacking the treatment of the various pieces of the model and the relationships amongst them that are certainly open to debate. Criticism, inquiry, and dialogue that consider the integrating model in its entirety would be most useful and is invited.

Some might find the model complicated; but it is necessarily so. Any attempt to capture and explain the dynamics of organizational learning must by definition be complex. Efforts to simplify or take "short cuts," as might be the case when an organization focuses on one or two elements of or strategies for organizational learning, may partially explain the difficulty organizations have experienced in trying to become more effective at learning.

The model seeks to build on the extensive organizational learning and knowledge management literature, and explain why, despite all that is known and prescribed, organizations fail to learn. Something important must be missing, the "glue" that would tie it all

together. The inability to think systemically or to overcome problems with mental models (Senge, 1990) and other "learning disabilities" (Garvin, 1993), including teaching "smart people" to learn (Argyris, 1982; 1991) account for part of the reasons organizations fail to learn and adapt. But it is not from lack of "know how." Organizations and the people who lead and manage them are smart, hard-working, and have the best of intentions in most cases. But they may not be wise. They may tend to do what makes sense at the moment, neglecting more complicated, far-reaching, or controversial issues and, thus, sacrificing the future.

Many of the elements included in the wisdom system already exist in most organizations. What is new, perhaps, is the way the elements are linked in terms of influence and inter-dependencies. This provides some of the glue. More adhesive and integrating are the philosophy and practice of wisdom, itself. It appears that where wisdom exists, intelligence, experience, and values are combined to consistently generate sound judgment and compassionate action (Baltes and Staudinger, 2000), even in challenging, unique, and unpredictable situations (Kitchener and Brenner, 1990).

At the heart of the wisdom model is learning. The wise person knows the limits of his or her own capabilities, as well as the limits of knowledge and what is knowable (Clayton and Birren, 1980; Meachum, 1990); thus is concerned with continuing to learn and "tapping" into the intelligence around him or her. Wise individuals tend to be open to others and new experiences. They talk with, not to others; more importantly, they listen. In Cleary's (1989) translations of Zen writings from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, Lingyuan commented that:

Good leaders make the mind of the community their mind, and never let their minds indulge in private prejudices. They make the eyes and ears of the community their eyes and ears, and never let their eyes and ears be partial (p. 45).

These ideas dovetail with emerging views on Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, 1998; Cooper and Sawaf, 1996; stewardship (Senge, 1990b; Spears, 2004) and servant leadership (McGill and Slocum, 1998; Greenleaf, 1977); and transformational leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1990; Avolio, Walman, and Yammarino, 1991; Sarros and Santora, 2001). If you take the best of the attributes and ideals of the modern leader and blend them, you produce the wise individual or wisdom. Not only are such characteristics needed in those in formal positions of leadership, but in all

of us. The wise organization is not exclusively one led by a minority of wise individuals, but is populated by people expected to be and working toward becoming wise themselves. In many respects, this parallels trends in empowerment and workplace democratization (Collins, 1997; Stohl and Cheney, 2001; Collom, 2003). Leaders might provide the context and role model for wisdom, but it is everyone's prerogative and obligation.

So, how to get at learning, this passage to wisdom? Wisdom is not knowledge, intelligence, values, or even, as commonly believed, experience, though it is a synergistic amalgam of them, fueled by learning. And, while curiosity or need may motivate learning, it is inspired and activated by reflection (Sharratt and Field, 1993; Chia and Morgan, 1996; O'Sullivan, 1999; Brown and Posner, 2001). One of the major contributions of the proposed model is the notion that reflection is a crucial feeder for learning and an elucidation of how this works. Not only has the impact of reflection on learning been convincingly demonstrated (Hays, 2004a), but reflection consistently appears as an attribute of the person who thinks and acts wisely (Birren and Fisher, 1990; Baltes and Staudinger, 1990; Kitchener and Brenner, 1990) and the capable strategic and transformational leader (Korac-Kakabadse, Korac-Kakabadse, and Kouszmin, 2001; Lichtenstein, 2000).

The attempt in this paper was to develop and present a defensible model of organizational learning and wisdom that makes both intuitive sense and incorporates accepted theory. The dynamic model of organizational wisdom is robust enough to provide guidance to practitioners, and to help explain problems being experienced. It tells them where sticking points might be, what might be causing them, and suggests what needs to be done about them. It provides a framework for understanding learning in organizations. This framework can be useful in designing and evaluating learning programs and strategies. Each organization and situation will be different, and implementers will have to tailor the framework to their unique circumstances. There is no simple formula. But, the chances of achieving success are greatly enhanced when the factors entertained here have been sufficiently dealt with.

The dynamic model of organizational wisdom supplies ample substance for debate, and suggests many directions for further research. Focus for research might address the elements themselves: are they the right ones? -do they collectively explain the dynamics of organization learning and wisdom, or are other variables more important? Do some of the variables carry

more weight? -which are most potent and, thus, would be the levers for change and improvement? What important variables have been missed? -where do they fit and confound the current model? And, then, the relationships and interdependencies. Have the most important relationships been identified? Are the directions of influence accurate? What additional research substantiates or refutes the relationships as proposed? Finally, given that the model is fairly complex, does it serve the practitioner? How does it hold up to the test of application? Managers tending to seek shortcuts or lower-cost alternatives will find little consolation and utility in the model. That said, any element could provide a starting point for intervention. An executive could do worse than to start with emphasis on learning and adaptability. Defining what is needed, assessing where the organization is relative to that, and planning a way forward make a fine beginning to becoming a learning organization.

Beginnings are about action. Action is a fundamental attribute of wisdom. Master Gaoan says in the True Record of Yunju (as interpreted by Cleary, 1989):

Wisdom is like water-when unused it stagnates, when stagnant it does not circulate, and when it does not circulate, wisdom does not act (p. 64).

As beginnings are about action, wisdom is about beginnings. Wisdom is never about closure or convergence; it is about starting fresh and opening up: seeing the world through new eyes. It is not about certainty, but knowing how uncertain things are. It is not about knowing everything, but knowing how little is known. It is not about being perfect or precise, but being on the way there. As wisdom grows, curiosity, fascination, and imagination are retained; not lost, as they often are when we become smarter and better educated. So wisdom is the beginning that should be sought; not the end. It is within this context that the ideas advanced here should be critiqued.

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