

JOY HIGGS

### 13. PURSUING PRACTICE WISDOM IN LEADERSHIP

Practical wisdom (phronesis) is an ancient, enigmatic, and intractable notion yet the manner of its workings and its influence on public life, professional practice and civil society remains little understood. Despite its profound effect on virtually every aspect of modern life, full understanding and comprehension of practical wisdom continue to elude us at every turn.

... Without doubt there is an urgent need to reset managerial priorities and corporate agendas to take into account the need for acting not just in the immediate self-interests of individual corporations but for the greater common good. (Chia, 2013, pp. xv-xvi)

The women who participated in this research were women of influence. From their actual accounts of their leadership experiences I came to appreciate that they were not only operating (usually wisely) in contested spaces but also that they were contesting these spaces and learning how to contest these spaces wisely. In their everyday working lives as well as in their strategic pursuits, they were facing dilemmas in leadership practice as well as using their abilities, indeed their practice wisdom, to practise amidst and through these dilemmas. In response to Chia's challenge, this chapter provides real examples through the experiences of the women in this study of what practice wisdom means.

This chapter is titled pursuing practice wisdom in leadership and through this research this phenomenon of practice wisdom will be examined in the context of educational leadership in secondary schools and universities, that is, the particular institutions of these research participants. Importantly, I am neither arguing that wisdom is an exclusively or predominantly feminine attribute, nor that it is particularly feminine in nature. Rather I am contending that wisdom derived from practice experiences and from reflection and challenging of these experiences, can produce wise way of knowing and practising, and that this is of particular value in leaders (of both genders).

The participants in this study demonstrated wisdom in the way they spoke about, understood and created their practice knowledge, and in the way they enacted their wisdom across their leadership and management roles. Also, we should note that neither they nor I are claiming that all of their behaviour and understandings were wise.

HIGGS



Instead, we can see wisdom in their moments of advanced realisations, their leadership inspirations and successes, in the way they dealt with situations that were beyond their control and the times when they failed to be successful in both task and relationship aspects of their leadership and management roles, but “held it all together”.

The title of the chapter emphasises the pursuit rather than simply the use of practice wisdom. I take pursuing to reflect three things. The first is the active pursuit or engagement with specific leadership tasks, dilemmas and challenges utilising the leader’s existing practice wisdom.

The second is the way that accumulated experiences, reflections on practice and deliberate learning activities encompass the active pursuit of professional development with an emphasis on the seeking of practice wisdom. The third is about a journey of pursuing wisdom, akin to the seeking of enlightenment, in which wisdom is a desired attribute and capacity, that is appreciated and respected as a way of both being and becoming (for the pursuit of wisdom is unending).

#### SETTING THE SCENE

To structure the chapter I posed three questions: Where does practice wisdom fit in relation to educational leadership? How does it relate to women in educational leadership? How do women in senior educational positions understand and develop leadership wisdom? These questions are addressed in this chapter through three conversations derived from the interviews and experiences of the women leaders in this project. Their words appear in *italics*. The conversations are:

Relating successful educational leadership to practice wisdom

Wise female educational leaders

Becoming a wise woman in educational leadership.

#### CONSTRUCTS

First let us consider these terms: practice, wisdom and practice wisdom.

Practice ... encompasses the various practices that comprise occupations, be they professions, disciplines, vocations or occupations. For doctors, engineers, historians, priests, physicists, musicians, carpenters and many other occupational groups, practice refers to the activities, models, norms, language, discourse, ways of knowing and thinking, technical capacities, knowledge, identities, philosophies and other sociocultural practices that collectively comprise their particular occupation. Essentially, practice is embodied, agential, and socially-historically constructed. Practice is situated and temporally located in local settings, life-worlds and systems, as

HIGGS

well as international discourses, and it is grounded and released in metaphor, interpretation and narrative. (Higgs, 2012, p. 3)

Both education and leadership are fields of practice. When we consider the definition of practice above we see that being an educational leader involves understanding the contexts of such leadership, learning a range of practice elements such as leadership language and actions and learning about what leadership can be.

As will be seen in many of the research participants' experiences below, an important part of being a leader is making leadership a personal form and enactment of practice. This involves two key actions: owning one's leadership (making it compatible with the leader's values, identity, interests and self) and interpretation (making sense of things – the situation, the task, the people factors, the potential risks and consequences).

Moving from leadership as enacted practice in the sense of task pursuit or productivity, to leadership as wise practice, requires understanding ideas of wisdom and deciding where we want to be and what type of leader we want to be. Many of the ideas presented in this book – ranging from coping and survival, to resilience, to thriving and attaining job fulfilment – help to address this question.

And, now, let us turn to wisdom.

The etymology of the words *wisdom* and *wise* suggest that they have always denoted or connoted high or elevated forms of behavior. Thus, being wise and displaying wisdom reflects forms of behavior that are admired, condoned and encouraged. This fact suggests that wisdom is at the top of a hierarchically organized system in which wisdom is a complex compound of elements blended with experience. Over time, this blend results in superior human qualities. (Birren & Fisher, 1990, p. 318)

Wisdom is not an easy idea. It can be written off as “an age thing” – the venerable sage – something that comes with much experience and years of engagement in a field. This can lead to the attitude of – well you just have to wait for it to develop. And, this, combined with attitudes of ageism and the power of youth, can dismiss wisdom as a form of folklore or “old wives' tales”.

Then, there's the argument of scientific hegemony which gives precedence to scientific knowledge and practices which are often seen to be “worlds away” from other interpretations of practice knowledge and knowing, such as wisdom.

To have a useful discussion on practice wisdom in educational leadership, first we need to move beyond unhelpful and dismissive definitions of practice wisdom and be open to its value; second, we need an acceptable definition and then we can be open to looking for practice wisdom in action and pursuing practice wisdom in ourselves. Consider the following interpretations.

Wisdom is not just a way of thinking about things; it is a way of doing things. If people wish to be wise, they have to act wisely, not just think wisely. (Sternberg, 2003, p. 188)

Practice wisdom is an embodied state of being, comprising self-knowledge, action capacity, deep understanding of practice and an appreciation of others, that imbues and guides insightful and quality practice. (Higgs, 2016, p. 65)

Using the definition above, we can see that there are considerable challenges for those who seek to understand and embrace the elusiveness of practice wisdom in the motivations, acts and achievements of educational leadership. These challenges are evident in the conversations below and in the voices of our women in educational leadership roles.

#### RELATING SUCCESSFUL EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP TO PRACTICE WISDOM

In the following story an educational leader talks about the world “behind the scenes” and “across time” in her academic world. Her story shows a depth of knowing and understanding, a real wisdom about how the system operates. As she brings this knowledge to her leadership, her practice and her work relationships will benefit because she has reflected deeply about her working world and understands how it works and how to work in it.

*If you've been around academia for a while and worked at different levels in the hierarchy then you can really see the importance of understanding the politics of places and systems. I think academic politics is a really curious mixture. It seems to blend the broad inherited paradigm of academic life, people's interests, the local culture and the system incentives. Let me explain.*

*Academia, referring broadly to the world of education, has high sounding goals of doing good for society through the education of children, young people and adults across the various levels from childhood schooling through secondary and tertiary education.*

*And, it is expected that both individuals as well as society as a whole benefit from this education. So the espoused practice paradigm of education is driven by altruism and positive gain as well as a sense of the educated (people) teaching those who are less educated about things they need to know for life and to support their contribution to society through work and knowledge generation.*

*Then you come to the idea of different interests. People investing considerable time and money in their own education or the education of their children want advancement for the learners, often through employment but also status, privilege and advantages in their lives and careers.*

HIGGS

*Industry wants skilled workers and customers to support and advance the delivery of their services and products. Industry can be said to include primary, secondary and tertiary forms of industry, plus employers, systems and infrastructures (e.g. healthcare, transportation) that support the structure of society and nations, multi-national conglomerates, entrepreneurs who benefit from and provide services to local and global communities) and government workforce systems.*

*Educational providers not only want to achieve their roles (of educating for the individual and common good) but also want to succeed in the complex environment of 21st century education.*

*This environment provides many incentives for certain types of performance (including high rankings in competitive schools' tables, international research status for universities, popularity that translates into high enrolments, wealth and status in schools and universities). The notion of the education market place is alive and well across all the education sectors.*

*How educational institutions market their graduates' outcomes and the learners' opportunities is strongly linked to these incentives. And, how they set out to accomplish these outcomes and experiences is pivotal to the sustainability of their success.*

*In addition, there is a range of different roles for groups and agencies (e.g. accreditation authorities, government departments of education, professional bodies, community and industry associations) who want to influence the quality and impact of education through such roles as gate keeping, standard setting, entrance criteria, external regulation, policies, and, in particular, government and private funding. All of these factors influence the political arena of education.*

In the following reflections, an educational leader reports that there's no easy way to be prepared for the politics of educational contexts. It is interesting to see that part of her wisdom in dealing with the challenges of educational politics is to recognise how you can enjoy debates rather than see them as battles. She is astute.

*Now, you know, there's no magic book on education politics. The complexity of this arena is enormous. You can complete higher degrees and management training but nothing really prepares you for the way systems behave (globally, nationally, locally) and the way people with all their different needs and motivations push and pull educational providers in competing directions.*

*These forces act strongly on the task of educational leadership and management and the pressures on educational leaders. So it means that many people learn from others and they often have to learn on the job through their own mistakes and facing the consequences of their decisions and actions.*

*When we think of politics we often have a negative image in mind: people trying to win at all costs, people thinking more about winning than serving those who appointed or elected them, people taking on negative attitudes to their opponents.*

*It can also refer to people who want to debate or question decisions and politics and in the process make these decisions better but perhaps also overshadowing the primary purpose of the (educational) institution.*

*If we replace the term politics with leadership – what difference does that make? Sometimes there is no difference. Sometimes leadership can be intensely positive and it can be shared – drawing others with responsibility into the arena of decision making and influence as well as work. Other times it can just be self-interested.*

*Political astuteness is aligned to practice wisdom. Some might call it having “nose” or having insight or learning to be insightful or having practical knowledge.*

#### WISE FEMALE EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

Understanding practice wisdom in educational leadership can come about by looking around at successful and wise leaders and also by learning to wear practice wisdom as a ‘second skin’, to live it, to embody it. It’s not just learning to ‘walk the walk’ outwardly, or ‘talk the talk’ politically, it’s also about genuinely living a form of wise leadership practice that merges self with effective leadership actions.

The women in this study reflected on female colleagues who were successful in academia. Often these women were described as wise and also courageous. Here are some of their stories.

*One of my key inspirations, is an exceptional leader. She can bring other people into line with her vision and she can clearly enunciate what her vision is and why she is trying to do it. That whole thing is important – it’s so much better if you don’t send anybody a surprise in an email but build the changes and communicate them well with justification.*

*She is excellent at getting her point across. She makes sure that she is listening to what they are telling her. And having*

HIGGS

*built trust with people it doesn't mean she agrees with them all – it's not possible.*

*In the end she has sold the decision and got people on side. The she doesn't back down. That's important too. People want a sense of direction as well as the chance to have input.*

*It's vital to learn to communicate as leaders and to promote effective communication with others by understanding where people are coming from. You need to convince the team that a certain project was a worthwhile endeavour for them to move into. And indeed it was found to be so, because they were very successful in gaining funding for the project. And that is partially because these were very ambitious people and excellent problem solvers.*

Sometimes practice wisdom involved the women in looking beyond or above the overt happenings and expectations around them. They brought insight and wisdom to their appreciation of the bigger picture of what was happening.

*We were required to change our faculty structures, and think about what the re-structure would look like and what process we would go through to engage the staff ... the consultation, workshopping and feedback needed and how to make decisions around these processes to achieve the final faculty structure. We needed to think about the management and leadership teams within that structure, what they do, how those positions are redefined and so on.*

*That was not a decision I could make on my own. I needed to influence my senior executive peers – that this was a worthwhile exercise, why it was strategically worthwhile. You also have to influence Council, the Vice-Chancellor and so forth as to why we should do that and what would be the intended outcomes and how to go about doing that.*

Wisdom in leadership goes beyond making good or effective choices. There are times when knowing if, when and how much one can afford to take risks, is part of wise practice.

*Problem solving and visioning are key expectations of wise leaders. This notion of actually being open minded and being willing to try some crazy things and take risks is part of being able to try new things and see if they work out. It was critical for our collaboration and indeed critical for us to move forward in the very positive fashion in which we did.*



*At some point you have to look at the big picture and these leaders were wonderful at the big picture, what I call the helicopter view.*

*So they are up there in the helicopter and we are down at the desk and somewhere in between we can talk to each other. So I was able to come and say, well listen why don't we look at it from this perspective and from that perspective, and this way of seeing different viewpoints was very successful.*

A number of the participants also linked the discussion of practice wisdom to making choices about blending oneself (particularly as a woman) to being a leader.

*Women often face two particular challenges in (educational) leadership: they're supposed to be more in touch with female skills and virtues like sharing, caring, collaboration; and, some would argue, they're supposed to redress the historical supremacy of males by advantaging females through their leadership power.*

*I think naturally there is the different style that women bring and that difference plays to some generally natural attributes that women have that are a little bit different to men in that sense. I've never tried to play one gender against each other and say well that's typical of a woman, typical of a man or whatever.*

*We need to work to helping people identify what their natural inherent strengths are, and how they may appreciate the difference in the approach, style and so forth of others. I think sometimes there tends to be more clustering around what might be female versus male types of environment. So when women are in a leadership role there are two things that I generally observe.*

*One is working with their natural tendencies where they use their ability to help, encourage, bring people along, identify strengths in people and have fairly robust conversations around the things that are not doing as well as those they are doing well. That doesn't always happen, so I think there's a different language approach that women tend to use.*

*But that's not all women, and there are men who will do that too. But I'm talking about in general, and then you actually have a different side when men will actually apply a different style.*

HIGGS

*I find women are more likely to be more honest and up front with you than perhaps some males and so that's a different style. The other style that you tend to see in women is when they try to emulate a more masculinised and aggressive style.*

*Women leaders who do make a difference and have influence will do so in a way that doesn't prevent people closing their ears because they're hearing the soapbox mantra as opposed to being persuaded by a balanced opinion and argument.*

*Now that doesn't mean that women don't have a sense of dogged determination in such situations but they do it in a far more considered and balanced way and they tend to influence in a meaningful way rather than in a dictatorial way.*

*So they're usually solution oriented, they can usually articulate the issue and they can identify approaches to dealing with it. And that's how they influence. If you're a solutions and outcomes orientated person, you will influence. Whereas if your only sphere of influence is to identify issues and having no mechanism by how to actually address those issues, then you won't be influential.*

#### BECOMING A WISE WOMAN IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Wisdom results from the application of successful intelligence and creativity toward the common good through a balancing of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extrapersonal interests over the short and long term. (Sternberg, 2003, p. 188)

Becoming a wise leader requires a lot of reflexivity and listening. Just doing things well was not seen as wise or becoming wise. Instead taking time out to understand and appraise oneself and seeking feedback from trusted peers were used by these women as ways to become (more) wise in leadership practice.

*The way you use power is really important. I was the chair of one of the key decision-making committees and I learned a great deal about how the system works. Sometimes all the senior leaders just pushed their positions on this committee and I had a hard time getting people to debate the issues. It was as though the committee existed for the Deans and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor to ram through whatever they wanted.*

*I tried hard to get people to listen to all levels and position holders in the room – but it was hard work. I need to be able to influence at least in some way. Let me put it to you this way. For me to operate in a senior peer team, I have to have an*

*effective working relationship with all my peers and it's not a win or lose situation.*

*There's a real issue about development. I think mentoring by a good leader is a great way to go. We need sensible feedback and to be valued. And we need to learn from the wise and effective practice of other leaders. I like mentoring people. I think I have a good skill base. I think I am very personable.*

*I think I have a reasonable emotional IQ and I think to be in a leadership role you do have to have a range of different abilities that don't include just your scientific or research kudos. These abilities focus around being a person who can communicate with other people and can also sit back and listen.*

*One of the things I've learned through taking on leadership roles is how to blend timely thinking with patience. This particularly relates to using information wisely. I remember one time thinking that I had done my homework very well and that I had all the relevant information at my fingertips.*

*The very next day some new information was received. I really did not have the full picture till then. I learned that sometimes you have to proceed with haste and other times you actually have to say, well we're (seemingly) ready but I need to actually put you on pause till I check things out further – this is a very important matter and we can't rush it.*

*Two of the things that wise leaders need to learn is to understand the context, particularly in a rapidly changing situation, and knowing how to get things done that involve other people and departments. Leaders learn to work well with the people who make things happen (such as administrative officers rather than the head of department).*

*In changing times this is particularly relevant, as is keeping in touch with the change priorities, targets and rewards. We've going through a real building and growth phase and everybody wants to be aboard something like that – so it's important to keep in touch with what's going on.*

*For the change leaders it's vital that we keep people on board and informed about what's happening and why.*

HIGGS

Becoming a leader and doing it well, to the point of practice wisdom, takes time, course and sometime single-mindedness and sacrifice. A number of the women reflected on the challenge this posed for women with family responsibilities (both children and elders).

*For some women, family is a big issue in taking on leadership roles. I think part of it, at that point in time, was that I was just returning into my career after a marriage breakdown, with three kids to bring up. And I was very conscious of making sure I had a secure career.*

*So there was an element of being pragmatic here – I told myself – don't knock any options back because you need to make sure you've got a job and that's why I did the PhD. I needed it to keep my job. There's a very pragmatic side, around being the breadwinner and you really need to make sure you keep your job. Leadership needed to be put on hold at the time.*

Another key issue the participants recognised in relation to becoming an effective leader was the idea that being “comfortable in my own skin”, which is a way of embodying wise (insightful, calm and rewarding) practice, doesn't happen overnight. Instead, it often happened across several jobs with different levels of responsibility and in different settings which allows learning and accrued wisdom to be carried forward, refined and re-imagined.

*I liked knowing about what's going on and being part of leadership. I've noticed this at each step up along the way, even when you do your first little Deputy Head role – or chairing a committee – you start to see a broader slice of the organisation and I really like that because I like seeing how the whole system works I suppose and having some opportunity to input into that system.*

*So I got to see what was happening at the Faculty, by the time I was Deputy Dean, I could see the Faculty as a whole, and the Faculty's connection with the university. And by the time I headed off into more corporate roles, I could see the whole university.*

*And I really liked that sense of oh OK, I'm not just looking at my own teaching arena and what I'm doing within it, I'm sort of seeing broadly. I like that understanding of how the whole system's ticking. I also quite liked the fact that, you do have some influence and power and the opportunity to have your voice heard.*

*For me – I learned to be an effective and respected leader over several jobs and several institutions. It was about understanding the way the system worked and how to influence things and people. Learning what sort of leader I wanted to be and how that fitted with success at the university. And, a lot of it was about success.*

*When I was successful I gained advantage, prestige and influence. I had some really good mentors that I could talk with along the way. And I learned a lot from role models – one in particular who was good at “doing the meet and greet”. As a leader I had to learn a lot about “managing up” as well as “managing down” and working laterally as well. And I had to learn to keep my cool.*

#### CONCLUSION

For each person reading these conversations above, let me ask you, do you share the experiences these women report? In your experiences in education and leadership – what part does practice wisdom play, and is it valued? How might educational leadership by men as well as women, be enhanced by appreciating the role that practice wisdom can play? How do you relate to the ideas expressed in the verse below?

As a leader  
first I am me.  
Then I am the position holder  
Or an influence  
beyond or without formal status  
What do I bring as a leader?  
First I bring me  
who I am  
what I stand for  
and who I am becoming.  
I strive  
in pursuit of wise practice  
that benefits those involved  
and achieves positive outcomes,  
to become wiser  
through critical reflection  
and interpretation  
and imagining  
and to still be  
a me  
that I value.

HIGGS

#### REFERENCES

- Birren, J. E & Fisher L. M. (1990). The elements of wisdom: Overview and integration. In R. J. Sternberg (Ed.), *Wisdom: Its nature, origins, and development* (pp. 317-332). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chia, R. C. H. (2013). Foreword. In W. Küpers and D. J. Pauleen (Eds), *A handbook of practical wisdom: Leadership, organization and integral business practice* (pp. xv-xvi). Farnham, Surrey: Gower.
- Higgs, J. (2012). Practice-based education: The practice-education-context-quality nexus. In J. Higgs, R. Barnett, S. Billett, M. Hutchings & F. Trede (Eds.), *Practice-based education: Perspectives and strategies* (pp. 3-12). Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense.
- Higgs, J. (2016). Practice wisdom and wise practice: Dancing between the core and the margins of practice discourse and lived practice. In J. Higgs & F. Trede (Eds.), *Professional practice discourse marginalia* (pp. 65-72). Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense.
- Sternberg, R. J. (2003). *Wisdom, intelligence, and creativity synthesized*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*Joy Higgs AM PhD*  
*Strategic Research Professor in Professional Practice*  
*Charles Sturt University*

