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# Unwise: Why Leadership Is in Crisis When We Need It the Most

By Dev Patnaik

*The complex, ambiguous challenges of our time demand wise leaders, not just knowledgeable ones. This article outlines how leaders can attain wisdom by pursuing personal growth and moral development.*

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What do searing global temperatures, the meltdown of Twitter and the rise of AI have in common?

Our crisis of leadership.

Wherever you look right now—from corporate boardrooms to international institutions to the political campaign trail— it seems that leaders are out of their depths, unable to cope with the growing complexity and ambiguity of our world. Are these leaders just not smart enough? No. That’s not it. Leaders are more book-smart than ever, bristling with Ivy League degrees, MBAs and technical expertise.

## **Separating Knowledge From Wisdom**

Clearly, knowledge alone doesn’t make a good leader. Many leaders today are missing a key element of leadership. It’s what makes the difference between a smart executive and a future-focused leader. It’s wisdom.

Exhibit A in the lack-of-wise-leadership case is the ongoing car crash at Twitter that has seen a mass culling of staff, an exodus of advertisers, mounting technical

problems and now the opportunistic rise of Meta's Threads. Rarely has a supposedly impregnable big tech firm fallen so far so fast.

No one could argue that Elon Musk isn't smart and knowledgeable. He's a leader who's brilliant at solving incredibly hard but linear problems like building an electric car and putting a rocket in space. But leading Twitter role is a very different job, requiring him to manage a vast user base bigger than many nations while coming up with policies governing free speech and community. It demands wisdom. And that's when an undoubtedly brilliant guy starts to stumble.

Whether it's Twitter's unraveling, or companies stumbling into damaging culture-war controversies, or AI executives failing to consider the legal and ethical risks of the technology they create, leaders are struggling to navigate change and ambiguity. It's taking its toll on CEOs. Turnover among chief executives hit a five-year high last year. The president of the university where I teach just resigned for reasons that make you shake your head.

Wise leaders are in short supply just when we need them most. The acceleration of climate change, the rise of AI and our growing social fragmentation all require wise—not just knowledgeable— leadership to avoid disastrous outcomes. And make no mistake. We're at a tipping point. The next ten years will likely determine the human condition for the next thousand years.

### **A Working Definition of Wisdom**

We've been losing touch with wisdom for decades—to the point where many people can't even tell the difference between intelligence and wisdom, and use the terms interchangeably.

So what does wisdom even look like? There are four indicators that can help you identify, and become, a wise leader:

- **Self-awareness:** In order to deal effectively with their company or the wider world, leaders first need to understand themselves. They need to understand their own motivations and be aware of the emotional baggage they carry into interactions with others. Most people suffer from a yawning gap between the emotions they feel and those they can express. My friend Brené Brown identifies 87 emotions and experiences that shape our lives, compared to the three (happy, sad and pissed off) that most people can express.
- **Social awareness:** This is the ability to appreciate, accept and work with the diverse behaviors and opinions of those around you. A wise leader has long ago left behind the teenage assumption that everyone in the world thinks like they do. They recognize that others have different—but no less valid—motivations and priorities that require empathy, understanding and skilled management.
- **Construct awareness:** Most everything around us has been made up by other people and can be changed—a simple fact that surprisingly few leaders have the insight and courage to act on. People get locked into a habits and assumptions and fail to challenge conventional thinking. Wise leaders can separate laws of nature from merely matters of custom. Steve Jobs epitomized this quality, launching the iPhone in defiance of commonly held notions of what a phone should be like.
- **Sphere of concern:** Perhaps the greatest indicator of your level of wisdom is the size of the world you care about. The bigger your sphere of concern, the wiser the leader you are likely to be. Philosopher Ken Wilbur says humans can move through four consciousness levels: egocentric, ethnocentric, worldcentric and cosmocentric. But not everyone makes it past the first two stages, where they're

limited to concern about themselves or their narrow tribe. Wise leaders are cosmocentric, concerned with all of existence—past, present and future. Think of how Nelson Mandela eschewed the easy path of retribution after he became South Africa’s president, pushing instead for forgiveness through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. We could at least aim to be more worldcentric.

Instead, society is becoming more self-centered and tribal. Personal identity has become paramount, driving people to an egocentric and ethnocentric view of the world. Leaders’ concern is shrinking, not growing. When billionaires’ response to a pandemic is seasteading and bunker building, you know we’ve veered away from wise leadership.

### **A Path To More Wisdom**

Why has this kind of myopic leader emerged? It’s not all their fault. We’ve built a system that rewards and encourages learning without growth. The attention to moral growth that schools and colleges used to provide has given way to a single-minded focus on skills and knowledge acquisition—a shift that’s been mimicked by corporate development programs.

To break this cycle, we need to focus on more than learning. We need to focus on growth. But the paths to learning and growth are wildly different. That’s why universities are typically so good at learning and so lousy at growth.

The basic model for learning is “listen and repeat.” In school, we make you read a book and then write an essay, but that’s basically the same thing.

Growth happens you “do and reflect.” You grow when you step outside your comfort zone and then make meaning of it by reflecting on what you’ve experienced. That’s why tools like journaling and performance coaches help.

Learning is about putting more stuff on your hard drive. Growth is about upgrading your operating system. It’s about getting wiser.

Organizations have to do more than train their people. They have to encourage and reward upgrades in wisdom. And while a wise CEO is a great thing, there are simply too many decisions that need to be made every day for a single person to manage. Right now, someone in your organization may be drafting an ill-advised tweet or a tone-deaf marketing campaign that could get you canceled. Or...are your people wiser than that?

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