

If I Knew Then What I Know Now Life Lessons In Wisdom

If you were to read the bumper book of wisdom when you were very young, it wouldn't make any sense. You have to live through something to understand it properly.

Guy Browning



Overview

Reading the “Big Bumper Book of Wisdom” won’t make you wise. Wisdom requires an engagement with the full flow of life experience. But wisdom gained only through experience can be slow, difficult and at times painful.

We asked a range of business leaders, talent management professionals and executive coaches:

“what do you wish you’d known at the start of your leadership career?”

This is the thing you wished you’d known when you were younger, and would have made your leadership career easier and better.

It follows Peter Drucker’s observation: *“Follow effective action with quiet reflection. From the quiet reflection will come even more effective action.”*

“If I Knew Then What I Know Now” is our survey of the insights that might accelerate the development of leadership wisdom, a quality in growing demand but in scarce supply. This is not a definitive analysis. But it does highlight key themes with implications for individuals aspiring to positions of leadership as well as those engaged in ways to develop current and emerging leaders.

“Wisdom is the dawning realisation that you know almost nothing and what you think you know will turn out later to be wrong. When you're 30, you look back and realise you knew nothing when you were 20. When you're 40, you realise you knew nothing at 30. This carries on until you're 80, when you finally realise that you actually knew everything important when you were 10.”

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The seven big themes

Broadly the themes could be grouped into the following areas:

- **It's about You**
- **Relationships with People**
- **Leadership as Me and We**
- **The importance of Informed Action**
- **Deal with the Tough Stuff**
- **Self Presentation**
- **Emotional and Social Support**

“By three methods we may learn wisdom.”

First, by reflection, which is noblest

Second, by imitation, which is easiest

Third by experience, which is the bitterest.

Confucius

It's about You

Start with yourself and what's important to you

Develop a moral compass to guide you through the challenges you will encounter

Set your own agenda of what you want to achieve rather than simply respond to others' expectations and demands

Don't wear a leadership coat; be prepared to be yourself and reveal to others the kind of person you are

It's OK to be different. Don't feel under pressure to conform

Don't compromise; maintain your standards



“It's about you” emerged as the most frequently mentioned theme. This set of insights echoes Peter Drucker's observation that *“until you figure out what success means to you personally, leadership is an almost pointless conversation.”*

If we don't know ourselves, our values and what we want, we will be on the back foot, responding to others' demands rather than shaping a distinctive leadership agenda.

Relationships with People

Get to know others, their motivations, priorities and the pressures they face

The importance of openness, honesty and values, and generally being more concerned with other people and the general interest, rather than just my own interests

Know who to trust and who to avoid

Work with people who are different to you, with complementary talents and skills

Less is more: know when to shut up and listen

Don't over-explain, you'll only confuse others

Communication isn't what you say; it's what others hear

Tell people the "small stuff"; they nearly always want to know more than you think

Make your intentions clear to others; don't leave them to second guess what you want. If you want something, ask for it

Challenge others but do it in a spirit of genuine curiosity



“If I knew then what I know now” is in large measure a set of lessons in human nature, interpersonal relationships and communication.

Life becomes easier and better for emerging leaders when they recognise quickly: the importance of understanding people, the power of diversity, that some individuals are however best avoided, and communication is complex but must be managed to build influence.

Leadership as me and we

Share leadership; you gain power when you spread it around

All real power comes from below; leadership isn't about position or status, it's about how you manage your people

Connect your goals to others' aspirations

Everyone has a brain and we should draw on this brain power

You don't have a monopoly of ideas; listen and ask questions to draw out others' suggestions

Don't attempt to do it all yourself; work with the most talented people you can

Invest personal time and energy in people; it takes time but it's worth it



The third theme is getting to grips with the nature of leadership and an insight into its true meaning.

Leadership as “me” is ego doing it for itself, an operating approach preoccupied with position and status. But caught up in its own world, it cannot sustain an impact.

“Me-we” leadership understands that it is others who have the power to lead, and it is only through others' talents and energies that anything meaningful can be achieved.

The importance of informed action

Do something, anything. Mistakes are better than inaction. At least with mistakes you learn something

Results matter; stop talking and get on with it

Double the time and effort and half the gains when you're planning a new project

Position change well before you implement

Keep things simple. When things get complicated, ask why?

Patience; let time pass before responding to challenges

Know when to stop; sometimes optimism and energy aren't enough. Know when to call it a day



There is a mix of insights here: the need to get on and do, accountability, the willingness to make mistakes, the importance of simplicity, the power of patience, and the recognition to quit when a course of action isn't working.

Action to achieve is important. Even more important is appreciating the realities of implementation, and the deployment of tactics to know when to speed up or slow down.

Deal with the tough stuff

Some tough stuff comes with the territory; don't take it personally. It's not always about you; often it's the situation

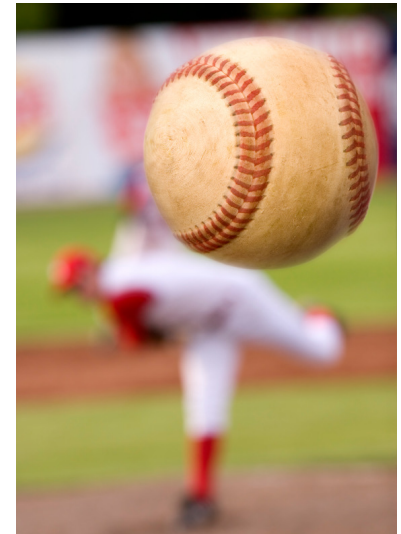
It's not a "popularity contest"; don't duck the difficult issues at the cost of the bigger picture

Remove the incompetent and the objectionable

If you suspect you have an issue, you probably do; ask yourself awkward issues and don't delay tackling problems

When you've got it wrong, say so quickly. And move on

Forget; don't hold on to past resentments. Let it go



Survey responses indicate a wish for a greater appreciation into the difficult and demanding times of leadership life.

Specifically the insights here are: to keep the tough stuff in proportion and not to take it all personally. And to deal with it sooner rather than later.

Self presentation

Image matters; present yourself well

It's always show time; you're always being observed.

Visibility - regular and informal - is key

Understand how others view your behaviour and actions and interpret you in different situations

Nothing is “off the record”. Be careful what you say and how you say it

Don't under-estimate the impact of old fashioned decency; manners matter

Be gracious; be charming even when others are not



The way we think we project ourselves may be different to how we are perceived. Survey respondents wish they had appreciated this reality earlier in their careers.

Image does matter. We are always in the spot light. Things we say in confidence do get back. And manners and charm make for a better life, even when others are being unreasonable and awkward.

Emotional and social support

Make time for your family and friends; don't get isolated

Manage your time and get organised; leadership life is too stressful if you don't

Take your foot off your pedal and take time out; find space to think

Find and use a peer support network; it can get lonely

Enjoy yourself; if it's not fun something is wrong



This final grouping summarises those insights around the recognition that organisational leadership is only one piece of the life jigsaw.

There is a sense of regret here. “If only” we’d known the importance of fun, friendship and family, and we’d managed our time better, our leadership lives would have been richer and more fulfilling.

Life experience and leadership

These insights highlight something important about life experience, with implications for how we accelerate the development of our current and emerging leaders.

- **personal experience is critical**, and it is only through direct exposure to the challenges of life and the consequences of mistakes that leaders learn. This isn't to advocate the "hard school of knocks, but to highlight the reality that personal change happens when the need is obvious and pressing. Human nature being what it is, some lessons we can learn only after we have failed the test.
- programmes for accelerated development should provide emerging leaders with powerful experiences **sooner rather than later**. Identify potential quickly and give it exposure to the Three As of Accountability, Adversity and Autonomy.
- conceptual understanding through business education and skills building in classroom based training may be helpful, but aren't a substitute for the **reflective experience of action learning, mentoring and coaching**. Give your leaders breathing space to make sense of their leadership experience and draw on the insights of others who have been on the same path.
- build an **understanding of leadership paradox**. There is "no one thing", "three simple steps" or "five principles". Instead leadership is wisdom in recognising that: leadership is me, but it is also we; that results matter but sometimes we have to stop doing to think; charm and grace are important but we also need to be tough; how we project ourselves is critical but we also need to maintain an authentic core.

“The seeker goes to the mountain top and asks the learned one:”

Where does wisdom come from? Good judgment.

Where does good judgement come from? Experience.

Where does experience come from? Bad judgement.

Sufi Story