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# **Exploring leadership wisdom**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of:

Master of Management  
in  
Management

At Massey University Albany

New Zealand

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2010

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this research has been to take an introductory investigation into the concept of leadership wisdom. This has been done by interviewing ten members from diverse departments in a large organisation and asking each one to discuss their experiences working with wise leaders. The analysis of the resulting interviews has provided a picture of how leadership wisdom is realised in the leader-follower relationship. It also implies that leadership wisdom can be found in the relationship between a leader who is both capable and willing, the level of openness of the participant to engage, and an environment conducive to encouraging such relationship. Given these three factors, the wise-leader follower relationship is one characterised by trust, emotional intelligence, effective communication and personal development.

## **Preface and Acknowledgements**

This research has been designed to take an initial look to see if the concept of leadership wisdom is evident in practice. If there is evidence of leadership wisdom then what does it look like. There is no view to create a new leadership theory but simply an exploration of a potentially significant aspect of leadership.

I would like to thank the relevant staff at ACME for their time and cooperation in participating with this research. Their willingness to provide such open and not always flattering accounts of their experiences is appreciated.

I would also like to acknowledge the direction and advice provided by my supervisor who encouraged me to see this as a journey we are taking together. And to thank my husband and children for providing patience and support and to let them know that “the computer’s free now”.

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk.

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# 1 Introduction

When I started this research I expected to hear stories about how wise leaders made heroic decisions in the face of adversity; decisions regarding seemingly complex issues that proved to be effective as events unfolded; leaders who portrayed an almost prophetic insight into impossible situations. Much like Solomon whose story of wise judgment is recorded in 1 Kings 3 v 16–28 (NASB). In this story he was presented with two women who were arguing over whose baby had died in the night. Apparently one had accidentally suffocated her baby while she was sleeping and was claiming the other baby was hers. Unable to be decided in the lower courts, and without the benefit of today's genetic testing, the case was brought before the King of Israel. His response was:

24b 'Get me a sword.' So they brought a sword before the king 25 Then the king said, 'Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one and half to the other.'

The wisdom of this command is not obvious until we read about how it elicits this dramatic response from the woman who we find out is the mother of the surviving baby.

26 Then the woman whose child was the living one spoke to the king, for she was deeply stirred over her son and said, 'Oh, my lord, give her the living child, and by no means kill him.' But the other said, 'He shall be neither mine nor yours; divide him!' 27 Then the king said, 'Give the first woman the living child, and by no means kill him. She is his mother.'

In this story Solomon is dealing with a seemingly insolvable problem by making a decision that would appear to be absurd. The purpose of his action is not obvious until the two women react and it becomes clear whose baby has been brought into court.

However, instead of hearing dramatic examples of heroic leaders doing great exploits, what I found were personal examples of how leaders have directly impacted the working

lives and personal lives of the participants in a positive way. This positive impact was found in the day-to-day activities, small nuances in conversations; as well as long-term relationships where both leaders and followers trusted and respected each other.

Participants saw wisdom in the way they were led more than where they were lead to; in the nature of their relationship than in the nature of the leaders themselves. This is a significant insight because it would seem to indicate that leadership wisdom is not so much a character trait found in some individuals rather it would seem to be found in a positive leader-follower relationship.

The purpose of this research was to gain greater understanding as to what leadership wisdom means. This quest suited a qualitative study as ‘Wisdom is concerned less with how we know and more with what we do and how we act’ (McKenna, Rooney & Boal, 2009, p. 187). By investigating the concept through the narrative process, I planned to build a picture of leadership wisdom through the experience and perspective of those who have encountered what they believe to be leadership wisdom. I chose this topic because it underpins leadership theory and practice (Cowan, 2008).

Throughout this investigative process I have explored leadership wisdom through the stories of those who have observed leadership wisdom first-hand. Although this may imply various leadership theories and concepts of wisdom, the primary narrative focus will tease out these theories inductively. The goal of this qualitative study, therefore, ‘...is not a quest of scientific truth, but a quest for meaning’ (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 167).

This research represents my first tentative steps in understanding what how leadership wisdom is described by staff in an organisation. This concept has been theorised from as early as Socrates (Benson, 2000) to more recently with the likes of Cowan (2008), Grint (2005), and McKenna et al. (2009). Many well known leaders have been described as wise



such as King Solomon (Johnson, 2006), Mahatma Gandhi (Parel, 2000) and Nelson Mandela (Sampson, 1999), with their contributions to society lauded globally with their actions and their counsel being studied, praised and oft quoted. It would seem that many would like to be led by the wise and many would like to think they lead wisely. So, the purpose of this research was to take this widely accepted and desired but yet little understood concept and attempt to gain a clearer picture of how it looks in the everyday situations in which people work.

My intention is not to devise another model of leadership traits and characteristics. Hence rather than seeking to generalise my findings I aim to discover the how and why of leaders' acts and behaviours in regards to wisdom as reported by 10 key informants. Therefore this thesis is about the perceived value and impact of wise leaders on their society, organisation and followers. As it is recorded in the Book of Proverbs 'For wisdom is better than jewels: And all desirable things cannot compare with her' (Proverbs 8:11) this thesis seeks to find the jewel that is wisdom in contemporary organisations.

Throughout this thesis I have tried to include my reason behind decisions I have made throughout the research process. Due to the potential for greater subjectivity in qualitative research (Maylor & Blackmon, 2005), I have tried to be as transparent as possible. This may result in a style that appears informal; however, I believe it opens the opportunity for the reader to form their own opinions on the subject. By doing this, I seek to engage my readers in a dialogue regarding what, I think, is a very important topic for any leader or follower.

While the concept of wisdom has been tracked from ancient cultures through stories and texts including religious and indigenous cultures, contemporary research into wisdom lacks a substantial body of literature, notwithstanding the works of Grint (2005) and McKenna,

et al., (2009). Others, for example Sternberg (2003), suggest that wisdom is an aspect of leadership such as the W (Wisdom) in his WICS (Wisdom Intelligence Creativity Synthesised) model. It is only in the past several years that the subject of leadership wisdom has been accepted in academic conferences as it was perceived that ‘wisdom was irrelevant’ (personal communication, Bernard McKenna, 10 June 2009).

Leadership wisdom is concerned with more than just the immediate organisational issues; and furthermore, what characterises wise leadership concerns more than just self interest (Sternberg, 2003). If knowledge and information is not applied wisely and action taken without consideration of all the stakeholders, then there is a risk of impacting negatively the very societies in which their organisations operate. The health of these societies, in turn, significantly impacts on organisations’ ability as they seek to thrive in their communities.

By interviewing individuals regarding their experiences of working with someone they regard as a wise leader it is hoped that valuable insights into the nature of leadership wisdom may be gained. For, as Cowan (2008) claims ‘our challenge is to seek exemplary leadership ways of being, thinking, and doing and learn from others in meaningful ways’ (p. 23). By this he is referring to moving away from traditional methods of mining large data sets for their statistical implications, to an in-depth exploration of individuals to discover more about *their* motivations and practices.

## **2 Literature review**

Leadership wisdom is a relatively new term that has only recently been a source of interest to researchers (McKenna et al., 2009). However, both wisdom and leadership are key subjects in multiple disciplines such as psychology (Baltes & Smith, 2008), behavioural development (Gluck, Bluck, Baron & McAdams, 2005) and business (Grint, 2007) for example. The following literature review is designed to provide a very brief overview of these very broad subjects in order to provide a context from which to discuss leadership wisdom.

### **2.1 Leadership in context**

Statements such as ‘Leadership is the ability to inspire confidence in and support among the people who are needed to achieve organisational goals’ (Dubrin & Dalglish, 2003, p. 3) can be found in Western leadership textbooks. As with wisdom, to be discussed next, there are a number of perspectives to take. Historically, leadership has been the domain of scholars studying Western organisations. However, Cowan (2008) suggests that we look beyond this view of leadership because it is likely that there is more than one way to view such a complex construct, and while the current Western perspective has been well represented in research, alternate views found among indigenous and Eastern cultures may be able to provide unique and useful insights.

Leadership is both complex (Palus & Horth, 2002) and situational (Cowan, 2008). Along with the role of leader comes power. This power can be wielded effectively without necessarily being for the greater good. However, it may be argued that there needs to more to leadership than the ability to wield power for, as Whittington, Pitts, Kageler & Goodwin suggest: ‘In an age when corruption and executive greed have eroded the trust in leaders,

there is an ever greater need to advocate credible leadership that is built on a strong foundation of integrity' (2005, p. 768). With the influence that leaders have, the decisions they make have significant impact in their organisations and the societies they inhabit.

There has been a plethora of theories regarding leadership (Dubrin & Dalglish, 2003). Predominantly, most are based on the nature of efficacy, for example charismatic leadership (Conger & Kanungo, 1987). A leadership theory such as this has only looked at the practice of effective leaders and misses the moral and ethical contexts within which leaders operate. For example, there have been a number of charismatic leaders whose goals and methods have proven to be unethical and immoral, such as Jim Jones of the Peoples Temple who led his congregation to a mass suicide in 1978 (Dubrin & Dalglish, 2003).

Other recent theories such as servant (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006), spiritual (Fry, 2003), authentic (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) and legacy (Whittington et al., 2005) leadership have sought to add dimensions that include leaders who reflect on moral character, ideals and sometimes contradictory motives that underpin decision making. These more recent theories signify a changing direction for current leadership research (Avolio, Walumbwa & Weber, 2009).

Historically there have been a number of researchers have attempted to define the personality traits of effective leaders and this approach is still active (Zaccaro, 2007). However, the majority of leadership research since the 1940's has been focused on leadership behaviour (Jackson & Parry, 2008).

While much of leadership research is focused on the leaders themselves (Jung, Yammarino & Lee, 2009), there are a number of other issues that influence the effectiveness of

leadership. One is the context in which leadership is worked out (Liden & Antonakis, 2009). For example, the attitude of the followers has been shown to have an impact on leadership effectiveness as will be discussed next. Context will be shown to be a significant factor throughout this research project.

Another key influence on leadership is that of the role of the follower (Jung et al., 2009). To understand leadership processes better there is a call to greater understanding of followership (Collinson, 2006). As Collinson suggests ‘the essence of leadership is followership and... without followers there can be no leaders’ (2006, p. 179). Zhu, Avolio and Walumbwa (2009) further suggest that leadership exists in the relationship between the leader and the follower, as leadership is ‘a social or interactive process’ (p. 591). The followers’ own attributes can impact on the success of the relationship (Berson, Dan & Yammarino, 2006) and even how the follower perceives the leader can have an impact on that relationship (Schyns, Kroon & Moors, 2007). For example, followers tend to think more positively of leaders who are more similar to them (Goldberg, Riordan & Zhang, 2008).

## **2.2 Wisdom**

Often, the foundation for understanding wisdom is based on Eastern religions (Yang, 2008) or ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle (Grint, 2005; Baltes & Smith, 2008, Dunham, 2010). One author suggests that wisdom can be removed from any cultural or spiritual contexts and be defined as ‘...the ability to make good and farsighted judgement’ (Nicholson, 2007, p. 379). However, to remove wisdom from context may alter the concept as it has a significant contextual element (Grint, 2005). As yet, there is no agreed upon definition of wisdom (for example Glück et al., 2005) so for the purpose of this thesis the following definition will be foundational; that ‘wisdom springs from integrity, and

becomes manifest through creative expression with excellence as its standard' (Johnson, 2006, p. 45). This definition will be explained further in the following section through the leadership style of King Solomon. Utilising a biblical perspective is becoming more popular in organisational research, particularly in leadership studies (Whittington et al., 2005).

It could be argued that having less foolishness and more wisdom in an organisation is desirable (Kekes, 1988). So, while it may be a difficult to conceptualise, nonetheless wisdom is an important ability for leaders to possess (Baltes & Smith, 2008) because of its potential to positively impact organisations. If this is indeed true, then wanting leaders to behave wisely; to make wise decisions; to speak with wisdom, is indeed a noble goal. While it may be hoped for, even expected, is leadership wisdom understood? Nevertheless it is something we should be looking to increase, because as Nicholson argues (2007), 'wisdom is a valued commodity in business as anywhere else' (p. 377). Aristotle describes sets of behaviours as practical wisdom. Practical wisdom is further described as 'the capacity to understand and act upon what is both *good and feasible for oneself and others* in particular situations' (Dunham, 2010, p. 523, emphasis in the original).

### **2.3 Leadership Wisdom**

A number of researchers have taken wisdom to be one of the elements of leadership (Sternberg, 2003) however it could also be argued that leadership wisdom underpins effective leadership practice. When complex issues arise that require solutions from seemingly contradictory perspectives, wisdom may achieve unique solutions because it 'does not reside at the same level of understanding as the conflict' (Cowan & Darsoe, 2008, p. 334).

Recently, there has been a call to investigate leadership wisdom as a separate entity (McKenna et al., 2009) rather than merely an element of leadership (Sternberg, 2003), as ‘few of us question the need for wisdom, yet to date academic scholarship has failed to address the role that wisdom plays in supporting organizational processes capable of addressing the world’s most demanding societal challenges’ (Adler, 2007, p. 423). To focus specifically on the area of leadership wisdom may provide added insight to a topic that has significant impact to our societies.

McKenna et al. (2009) have proposed that there are five essential principles for leadership wisdom. These principles are then placed into context when put into practice. Wise people are able to identify the issues of a situation and determine what is and is not important. From there, they are able to make decisions appropriately. Further to this, McKenna & Rooney (2008) also suggest that:

A crucial capacity of the wise leader is that of Ontological acuity: the capacity to understand the categorical and epistemic foundations of knowledge systems and the context in which this foundation derives its meaning, or common sense. It is not just a cognitive phenomenon; it is a capacity, often intuitive and tacit, to understand discursive structures and organizational knowledge (p. 538).

Ontological acuity means the ability of the leader to move from looking at issues at face value to being able to see the underlying inter and intra organisational factors that may have an impact.

Having the confidence in their own abilities, wise people can also utilise less obvious cues when making decisions. This phenomenon may be described as intuition which has been defined by Sinclair & Ashkanasy as ‘a non-sequential information-processing mode, which comprises both cognitive and affective elements and results in direct knowing without any use of conscious reasoning’ (2005, p. 353). This concept also embraces the wise person’s ability to understand what is happening from a strategic perspective. By being able to

make connections with seemingly disparate concepts, the wise person is able to draw their differences together to make a meaningful decision. Because of such oversight and foresight, the wise person is able to cope with uncertainty and is able to help those they lead to deal with uncertainty.

One area that is seen as fundamental to wise leadership is that of ethics. Ethical judgment and moral values have been significant in ancient wisdom teaching through to recent wisdom research (McKenna et al., 2009). Wise leaders are seen to be making choices and taking action that will provide well for those around them including themselves. This is moderated by an understanding that decisions may not always be based on unchanging principles but have to be applied within the context of uncertainty (McKenna et al., 2009).

McKenna et al go on to describe wise leaders as being “articulate, understand the aesthetic dimension of their work and seek intrinsic personal and social rewards of contributing to the good life” (2009, p. 180): Not only able to articulate what they know, wise leaders are also able to communicate to followers why decisions have been made in a way that appeals to the followers cognitive and affective needs.

Further to these suggestions, McKenna et al. (2009) continue with two practices of leadership wisdom which are that wise leadership is domain specific, or contextualized and there are varying degrees of wisdom: a continuum of wise, wiser and wisest. It could be argued that the continuum may also include unwise to provide a broader spectrum.

It can be tempting to try and discover an ideal leader however it is likely that one does not exist (Collinson, 2005). Fortunately, it is possible to learn from the examples of others (Cowan, 2008). For an exemplar of leadership and wisdom combined I will refer to the reign of King Solomon (c 971–931 BCE). As the son of King David and the third king of



the unified kingdom of ancient Israel before the split into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah he is known for the immense wealth that was amassed; the peace he brought to a traditionally volatile region; the development of the Hebrew language (to where it became one of the important languages of the region) and his wise council. His reputation as a wise man is evidenced by the number of other leaders who went to him for advice on many and varied topics such as The Queen of Sheba (Tenney & Barabas, 1975).

It would appear that the key element to Solomon's success can be found in his wisdom (I Kings 10:24). Returning to the earlier definition of wisdom, 'wisdom springs from integrity, and becomes manifest through creative expression with excellence as its standard' (Johnson, 2006, p. 45) these elements are reflected in the descriptions of Solomon's reign. This is seen in his wise counsel (I Kings 4:34), in his excellence of workmanship (II Chronicles 9:3-4), manifested and in his integrity (Proverbs 10:9).

The Proverbs describe wisdom as the very essence of creativity (Proverbs 8:29-31). Creativity has been identified as an essential part of leadership by Sternberg (2008). Bartlet and Ghosal (1995) suggest that a wise leader is able to release the individual to take initiative into areas of creativity and entrepreneurship. Perhaps the creative element that has been observed in a number of leadership studies is accessed through the acquisition of wise leaders.

If wisdom has been such a significant part of many societies and ancient writings then the question should be asked why that wisdom and leadership is only recently have been linked in business research. One explanation could be that the use of the word wisdom is the type of linguistic progression seen in the leadership discipline. Teo-Dixon & Monin (2007) suggest that the language around leadership has progressed from manager to leader

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to 'CEO (Chief Executive Officer) superman' in a pattern that would appear to be moving towards establishing a type of god term (p. 16).

From this theoretical basis the following is a description of the research journey I have taken regarding leadership wisdom.

### **3 Method**

During this research I will be referring to myself in the first person. This is to encourage transparency in the process as there is always the potential for factors to be over emphasized or ignored that may be important, due to the perspective of the researcher (Amis & Silk, 2008).

As part of the preparation for this research, I read a number of journals and books on wisdom. For example McKenna et al., 2009, Grint, 2007, Johnson, 2006 and Staudinger, 2001 were particularly informative and helped shape my understanding of the subject in its contemporary manifestation. While this has helped me to understand what is currently known about the subject, I will be researching the subject inductively, allowing the themes and patterns to emerge from the interview narratives (Klenke, 2008).

By taking an inductive approach I am able to assimilate what I have read about the subject with what I am observing. However, rather than trying to fit my observations with what has been written, I am also able to reflect on any similarities or differences and return to the literature from alternate perspectives in a process where 'perception and sense-making are intertwined' (Hatch & Yanow, 2008, p. 30). This somewhat organic approach may assist in the concept of leadership wisdom being observed within the context it is presented in. The intent is to provide insight into the concept through the conversations with its participants (Boje, Oswick & Ford, 2004).

As discussed in the literature review, leadership and wisdom are both complex and situational constructs; therefore the study of leadership wisdom needs to be sensitive to these factors (Fairhurst, 2009 and Liden & Antonakis, 2009). The choice of a narrative

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method to carry out the study in leadership seems to be preferable as it has the ability to investigate constructs within a context rather than isolating the construct as this may overly simplify or even distort the image. Campbell, Ward, Sonnenfeld & Agle (2008) suggest that it is preferable to conduct research in the field of leader-follower perception in the context of relationship rather than to ask theoretical questions about strangers. While not anticipated, as the research progressed the issue of leader-follower perception became significant. So potentially this method of research has provided a more accurate picture of the construct leadership wisdom.

The decision to interview people regarding their understanding and experience of leadership wisdom is to endeavour to gain a picture of what the concept looks like as it has been suggested that wisdom is 'carried' by wise people through their actions (Staudinger, 2001, p. 16511). As Glück et al., (2005) have suggested:

Autobiographical memory acts as a storehouse of complex, integrated information about our life experiences, including the experience of having acted wisely. Tapping memory, through narratives, is a rich source of data on wisdom in individual lives (p. 198).

Hearing from the participants themselves, and having them relate their stories by highlighting what is important to them, has provided a multi-perspective construct. It may have also reduced my influence, as the researcher, over what issues are raised and nuances highlighted. The content of the interviews have, to the best of my ability, lead the direction of the research.

Each participant was asked about what they thought are the characteristics of a wise person. Baltes, Staudinger, Maercker and Smith (1995) have shown that people who are

regarded as not specialised in the area of wisdom are still fairly accurate at determining who the wise people are. When they compared the results of a group of nominated wise people, a group of predetermined wise people (senior clinical psychologists) and a random sample, the nominees and the psychologists did fairly equally. So, even though I have only asked for the participant's opinion based on Baltes et al. (1995) I can be reasonably confident that they have identified wise people to describe. Further to that logic, I have then made the assumption that they can take what they know regarding wisdom and apply it to people in leadership.

### **3.1 The process**

The format for this research is as follows.

- I. Approval from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (see Appendix i)
- II. The Human Resources director of a large multinational company was approached regarding the company's willingness to participate
- III. The Human Resources director was provided with an outline of the research and the general requirements for participants. These requirements were broad as in they had to have been in the workforce for more than five years, they needed to be from various departments and locations and they had to be interested in participating.
- IV. Participants were identified by the HR director and asked if they would like to be a part of the research. An introductory email was sent to each nominee outlining the research, what would be required of them as participants, and an explanation that

participation in this research was entirely voluntary (see Appendix ii). All 10 participants nominated agreed to participate.

V. Interview participants – Each interview was conducted on site within their usual working hours. Each interview was approximately one hour long. Each interviewee was taken through the information sheet (see Appendix iii) before being asked to sign the consent documents. All participants signed the consent documents. They were also advised that there may be a follow-up interview if further clarification or explanation necessary, however, this proved unnecessary.

VI. Interviews were then transcribed.

VII. Patterns and themes were then analysed.

VIII. Results have been presented as descriptions of the interviews.

The term ‘follower’ has been used throughout the research report. This is simply another word for subordinate or the person that works with the leader. It is not meant to suggest passivity or that the person themselves is not a leader. It is just a term to indicate a relationship with the person they ascribe as being wise.

### **3.2 The participants**

The participants were selected in a combination of both convenience and theoretical sampling (Maylor & Blackomon, 2005). Convenient because I had access to potential participants from one organisation and theoretical in that in order to gain the greatest variety, the participants were selected from 10 different departments within the firm. The other criterion was that they had to have been in the workforce for longer than five years.

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This was to increase the potential that they would have worked for more than one manager and in more than one organisation.

The company, 'ACME' (a pseudonym), who agreed to participate in this research, is a multi-national manufacturing company that employs approximately 1300 people in the Australasian region and approximately 50,000 worldwide. The participants were all volunteers and they were all advised that their identity and anyone or any company they mentioned would be kept anonymous. They were also encouraged to talk about people they had worked with from anywhere they had worked with in the past or present. It was emphasised during the introductory brief that this interview was not initiated by ACME and was not focused on ACME.

While only from the one organisation, the participants were relatively diverse in positions of responsibility, years in the workforce, and numbers of organisations in which they had worked. The leaders they discussed were also varied and included managers from the first jobs they had, current managers, entrepreneurs, managers who had spent years in one organisation, managers who were only in organisations a short time while working their way up to more senior roles, and one manager who was working out his last few years before retirement.

The participants and the wise leaders have all been given a pseudonym and, to further ensure anonymity, no reference to their job title or tenure at ACME, or any other organisation they have worked for has been recorded. All leaders who have been nominated to be wise have been given a pseudonym starting with the letter W to help with easier identification.

**Table 1: List of participants**

Pseudonym	No. of years in workforce	No. of different organisations	No. of current direct reports	Wise leader pseudonyms
Dale	26	4	3	William
Rodger	24	2	6	Walter Watson Wayne Wickham
Pamela	26	10	3	Wendy
Penny	20	3	4	Wyman Whittaker Waldo Wheeler
Fiona	14	5	0	Wade
Cathy	14	3	5	Willard Wilson Wagner Whitney
Mindy	15	4	1	Wanda
Jeremy	17	7	5	Windslow
Blake	13	3	0	Walcott Wyatt
Charlie	26	2	6	Wilbur

I have made the assumption that the more experience each participant had the more likely they were to have observed a wise leader. The inclusion of the number of direct reports (or even if they had any reports) was added to see if this variable would thicken their narrative. However, as will be discussed, participants who had direct reports seemed to provide more multidimensional feedback than those who did not have direct reports.



### **3.3 The interviews**

As only 10 participants have been interviewed, it was necessary to establish rapport with the participants in an extended interview to ensure a high level of understanding and engagement (Easterby-Smith, Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2008). In order to provide this rich feedback an open-ended interview style has been utilised. This style of interviewing is akin to a conversation and develops over the space of the interview, sometimes along unexpected paths. While I participated in the conversations my purpose was to discover their experiences in the area of leadership wisdom. As with a conversation, I did not have full control over what was discussed, but rather acted as a guide and collaborator in the discussion. Therefore, themes emerged that I had not anticipated (Cowan, 2008; Klenke, 2008). To honour such a process and to honestly allow the subject to lead the research, an iterative style has been employed at all stages (Maylor & Blackman, 2005).

This iterative style has been done through a process of reviewing each step as it is taken and allowing the research to develop. This has meant, at times, that transcripts have had to be reassessed in the light of new perspectives. On occasion, I have also approached, throughout the results and discussion sections, what would seem to be similar concepts from multiple angles. For example, the issue of communication is discussed in how it is related to safety, how it impacts the leader/follower relationship, and how the leader represents the team to others.

During each interview I also wrote notes. These notes served to keep me focused on each interview and I also used them to highlight areas I wanted to return to so that they did not distract me as I listened. The challenge of being open to listen to the participants while ensuring we stayed within the broader subject of interest was at times quite difficult. It

was tempting to catch onto themes and I was aware this could mean that other insights that I had not yet perceived or ones that were potentially more subtle, may go by unnoticed and unexplored. When interviewing Dale he mentioned the term 'gut-feel' which reminded me of the concept McKenna et al. (2009) suggest of intuition. This felt, to me, that I was looking for intuition to be a theme. I noted this down after the interview and made a conscious decision not to try and prompt further participants in this area.

In order to minimise prejudging any identified issues I not only tried to ensure that I followed the interviewees leading during the interview and I have also taken the time to transcribe each of the interviews personally. I have found that by doing this there have been elements I have discovered that I had not particularly picked up on during the interviews. An example of this is the unwise leaders that were described by Cathy were people who reported to her. The resulting description of the unwise leaders, I discovered, are significantly different from those who described unwise leaders to whom they had reported.

### **3.4 The questions**

The main questions were prepared ahead of time to ensure the identified topics were covered. However, probing questions were asked in response to the interviewees' answers as various themes become apparent and if I felt there was need for greater clarification (Klenke, 2008). Because of my commitment to the inductive process some of the questions asked of the participants did change somewhat throughout the interview process. This was partially because of the conversational style of the interviewing but also as themes emerged I felt it necessary to explore them further with subsequent participants. An example of this was when I found that the first few participants mentioned how long

they had known their wise leaders. After noticing this trend, I then asked subsequent participants how long it took before they formed the opinion that their wise leader was in fact wise.

So, while there were some changes to the conversational topics, I did endeavour to maintain the core topics as in:

1. Describe the characteristics of a wise person
2. Describe the characteristics of a wise leader
3. Describe an unwise leader
4. What impact do you think the wise leader has had?

The results have been presented based around these core topics.

In order to maintain a conversational atmosphere these questions were used as a guide only and other questions were asked when clarification was required. This style proved effective for most of the participants. Throughout the process every effort has been made not to lead the interviewees.

Question three was designed to help the participants be more explicit regarding the nature of wisdom. The decision to ask the participants about an unwise leader was to endeavour to define wise leadership better. I was trying to encourage the participants to think about the concept from more than one angle. What I found was that the participants felt the unwise managers had both positive and negative characteristics. However, I also found that the participants felt the wise managers had both positive and negative characteristics.

So while these two concepts of wise and unwise leaders do not appear to be opposite concepts, the participants made clear distinctions between their opinions of the two types. So this question has provided some interesting insights that will be discussed later.

While some participants did require further prompting, others barely required any prompting at all and I noticed that that some participants anticipated my questions before I had asked them while others tended to get off topic quite easily. My first interviewee was like that and because it was my first interview I found that I let the interview drift too far off topic so there are portions of that interview that are not relevant. Balancing the opportunity to drift away from topic and the potential to discover further insight with the requirement to also recognise what is becoming irrelevant really highlighted to me one of the challenges of qualitative research. However, I discerned that I learnt more with each interview as my own understanding of leadership wisdom evolved. I did this by reflecting on what I felt went well and what could needed improving after each interview.

Each interview was recorded digitally. The recordings provided clear results and full transcripts of each interview were made available to each respective subject to check for accuracy, however, all subjects said that while they were interested in the outcomes of the research they did not feel they needed to read through the transcripts. So, none of the participants requested their transcripts for review.

### **3.5 Analytical process**

It had been my intention that by taking an iterative approach, similar concepts and themes may keep re-occurring as the interviews progressed. So, rather than trying to fit the stories into a theoretical concept, the transcripts were analysed for 'notable highlights and meaningful patterns' (Cowan, 2008, p. 10). The goal of this research has been to let the

research guide the process as much as possible. An honest attempt has been made to identify themes as interviews have progressed rather than lead the interviewees in predetermined patterns as is appropriate when taking a grounded theory approach (Fendt & Sachs, 2008).

Both qualitative and quantitative research has been referenced throughout this thesis as recommended by Bryman (2004). However, the data collection method and the data analysis methodology have been done in a purely qualitative approach. There are two reasons this choice was made. Firstly, leadership and wisdom are both contextual concepts. Secondly, this type of research suits my personal preference and strengths that I can offer the research process. This is not to suggest that I have opted for the easier path as ‘qualitative enquiry, although essential to management and organisational research, is also difficult to do’ (Fendt & Sachs, 2008, p. 432).

Themes have been identified through a series of ‘concept extractions’ through a process of coding (Maylor & Blackmon, 2005, p. 353). Each interview was transcribed and the transcriptions printed and kept as separate documents. I then read through the same section for each document starting with the section regarding the participants descriptions of what they thought were the characteristics of wise people. I then drew up a series of charts with what seemed to be significant phrases and descriptors used by the participants. These items were placed in columns according to the participants and, where appropriate, further broken down to individuals they described. For each section, the A4 pieces of paper were taped together in order to create one seamless table, however, at this stage no effort was made to find similarities between the interviews or even between the various people they described. I then went down each column and began to form a colour code for various themes as they seemed to come to light. Once that was complete I then began to

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compare the content across the columns. During this process and throughout the whole research process I have found that I have needed to reassess the linkages within and between concepts as there seemed to be similar concepts from different perspectives. An example of this is with the theme of 'Trust'. I originally had a separate theme entitled 'Security' as well but after several drafts and further research it appeared that these two concepts were linked.

In order to avoid forcing the data into categories that would seem to fit a rigid structure, I have chosen a more relaxed style of coding as Tan (2010) suggest. While I have found that it has lead to a lot reassessing and readdressing of the data, however, I feel that it may have allowed for a more open-minded approach which, according to Tan (2010) should be the goal.

The final list of core concepts have then been discussed in light of other research findings. The expected outcome is a clear introductory explanation of what I think leadership wisdom looks like in practice.

As qualitative research can be described as a craft it has been important for me to be supervised throughout the process (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). As this is my first research project, I understand that there are limitations to my skills and knowledge. To reduce the impact of my inexperience I have been in regular contact with my supervisor and also taken the time to reflect on the process as it was happening in order to actively learn from what appeared to work well and what was not as useful.

My goal is to provide a greater understanding of what is a complex but important subject (Cowan, 2008). As Weick suggests 'When you develop the capacity to act on something then you can afford to see it' (2007, p. 9). The purpose is to develop an understanding of

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what leadership wisdom is and how it works; from there it may be possible to value it in action. From there we can potentially provide environments that encourage it (McKenna et al., 2009).

By first discussing the nature of wisdom the participants were then led through to the next step of identifying one or more examples of leaders they have observed and would regard as wise. With each participant it was explained that the wise leader did not have to be someone who had lead them directly but could be anyone that they had observed. This explanation proved relatively futile as all but one wise leader that was identified were managers of the participants and all but one of those were direct supervisors at some stage of their relationship. The participants were allowed to determine how many wise leaders they would like to talk about. All participants chose between one and four examples.

As the topic of this research is leadership wisdom as observed through 10 individuals who have been in the work force for at least five years, I have made the decision to reduce any possible identifiers of the subject, their work places, their functions or even the industries in which they have worked. While further research that includes a breakdown of various groupings of participants may be interesting, it goes beyond the scope of this research project. This will be discussed further in the section on ‘Limitations and opportunities for further research’ section.

The goal is to create a type of mosaic of what a wise leaders looks like. Based on the observations of the participants I have tried to create a multi-dimensional picture of wise leadership. Throughout this project I have endeavoured to be as transparent as possible in order to show clearly not just the research process but also to show any progress I have made in regards to learning how to conduct research. This means that there are times that

rather than edit out areas where, in retrospect, I have felt that I should have done things differently I have chosen to leave them in and discuss possible reduction in potential or how I could have chosen to do it differently.

When first asked about identifying a wise leader the interviewees tended to focus on surface issues and used terms like ‘silver back’ and ‘Gandalf’ to describe people who were with greying hair. However, when pressed to be more descriptive, a richer, less age-bound picture emerged from the interviews.

The interviewees have provided a rich and dynamic picture of the experiences they have shared with their wise leaders. I found that the interviews tended to easily transition into conversations that provided not only interesting descriptions but also allowed the content of the conversation to lead the direction. The participants were willing to discuss their experiences and, as can be seen in the results section, willing to openly share and contribute to the learning process.



## **4 Results**

The interviews yielded themes such as communication, the impact of relationship and the role of the follower. As there was no way to predict how the participants would respond, the resulting discussions were not necessarily produced in a linear fashion. This is particularly obvious with the response to how the leader has impacted the individual. For a number of the interviews, the participants were often reflecting on how the wise leader impacted on their lives while answering the question concerning describing wise leaders they had observed. For example, Cathy, when answering the question regarding describing a wise leader she talks about Willard: ‘So, he would talk to me about it’s time to go overseas, time to look for a job because he’d learnt growing up about taking risks, I’m not a risky person but he’s an entrepreneur and he’s taken risks all his life so I’ve learnt from him a lot.’ From this example, the Cathy describes both what Willard is like and then explains how he has impacted her.

### **4.1 Describe the characteristics of a wise person**

Before the topic of leadership wisdom was introduced we discussed wisdom in general terms. The participants initially found that they were not sure what they thought regarding wise people, however, this changed as they started talking about specific examples of a wise person. So the question ‘how would you describe a wise person?’ was the starting point for each of the interviews. Each participant gave a different definition. As Mindy reflected ‘Wise people can also - it’s interesting, [it’s] a weird word. I think wise is weird because to me there’s a lot of different [definitions], I mean having wisdom and being wise can be different...’ Only about three to five minutes was spent on this question and it seems to have been like a warm up question to help focus the participants on the topic.

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While they may not have heard or thought of the concept of leadership wisdom, they were all somewhat familiar with the concept of wisdom.

Not all of the participants were slow to start. Charlie, who has studied leadership, was quite succinct from the outset. He described a wise person as 'Someone who has combined their experience, knowledge and judgement to be able to provide feedback on a particular topic'. He felt that there is a strong need for self-awareness which was also something he brought up as being one of the strengths of Wilbur. He believes this is important because you 'need to understand yourself quite well' so that when you 'reflect and rationalise' the conclusions you draw are relevant to the situation. This theme of being self aware came up with a number of participants who often described it as having a high emotional intelligence (EI).

The participants talked not only was EI raised but also a high intelligence level (IQ). Dale went straight from EI and IQ to describe a wise person to progressing to discuss his thoughts on what the characteristics of a wise leader are. They included the ability to get see the potential in their people and then to be able to get the most out them. The motivation being 'I need people like this around me to make whatever I'm doing, the company better, the project better, whatever it is – better'. Jeremy suggests that the wise person is challenging not only to others but also so because he thought they have a 'need to understand'.

Other participants linked wisdom with age, describing them with terms like 'silver-back' and 'Gandolf'. They are people who are sought after in their situation that have a great deal of knowledge and experience. Also, the knowledge is not 'just in their work but in life in general'. However, it is not just what they know and have done but also but also 'the quality of thought and how they can apply their experiences to other situation.

Wise people are also described as people who can see situations from different perspectives and, as Fiona suggests, can ‘stand back from a situation and assess it and give the right direction’. Mindy felt that wise people ‘can join the dots of even unrelated kinds of concepts’ meaning that they are able to understand how seemingly disparate issues can be linked.

Wise people are described as courageous and articulate, to be ‘able to see issues and raise and communicate what they see’. These factors are contrasted with also being nurturing and good listeners. Mindy describes wise people as wanting to share their knowledge, want to help others, while Penny described them as being open and honest.

Another issue that a few participants raised was that people can be wise but they may not always be active. So while there may be the potential for wisdom, it’s not always shared. While some people may be wise in some areas, Blake points out they may not be wise in all things.

While most of the characteristics of the wise person were then part of the descriptions of wise leaders, there was one in particular that was not. This was the aspect of age as there were a number of wise leaders who were not significantly older than the participants. They were Wickham, Whitney and Wanda. However, in each occasion the participants highlighted the fact that there was not a big age gap.

#### **4.2 Describe the characteristics of a wise leader**

The participants were then asked if they had worked with anyone who they consider to be a wise leader and then to describe them. The participants were allowed to choose as many examples as they wished and numbers ranged from 1–4 nominated wise leaders. The participants were also free to choose anyone that they may have observed and they were

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not restricted to direct managers. However, the overwhelming majority described people with whom they had worked as a direct-report.

Only one of the wise leaders discussed by a participant could be described as a ‘celebrity’ type figure. This wise leader is well known in her region and receives significant media attention. She is described by Dale as appearing to be ‘calm, considered, approachable... but very authoritative’. Dale has never worked in the same organisation as this wise leader and did qualify his comments by saying that he has had no direct contact with her so he has drawn these conclusions from what he has observed via the media.

Dale then went on to describe a manager he had worked for as being someone who may not be considered wise by others. Working with this person impacted Dale so significantly that William made him ‘feel good, made me feel valued and want to get out of bed everyday...’ While William was ‘functionally competent’ he was not an expert in every aspect of the role. Dale went on to describe how he felt valued because William was able to admit to not knowing everything and was willing to make statements like ‘I will trust your recommendation’ regarding group decisions. William did not micromanage Dale’s work and he created an environment where Dale felt safe enough to work productively. William did this by ‘constructively challenging’ the projects Dale was working on to ensure they were suitably scrutinised. As Dale said in regards to presenting a project to a client or to the senior management group, you ‘feel more bullet proof... when you’ve worked through a project and you feel it’s been looked at every which way’.

Dale talked about how he likes his manager to provide prudent feedback but that it does not mean he likes to have every little detail of his work inspected. He does not appreciate a manager who is not functionally competent as he sees that the person can add no value to the process. His preference is that when a decision has been made it is stuck to otherwise

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he describes constantly revisiting issues as being like a 'death by a thousand cuts'.

Decision making, he said, is very important and he went on to add 'I almost think that a bad decision is better than no decision'.

William is described as 'a bit of a square peg in a round hole'. It would seem that he was more of a visionary which, according to Dale, suits a company in a 'growth phase'.

Unfortunately, at that time, the company was not in a growth phase so Dale thought that what the company wanted at the time was someone less focused on the visionary aspects and more concentrated on the immediate issues. While William may not have been appreciated by the company it would seem that he certainly was by the Dale. So it may be that a William's impact on the organisation may not have any relation to the impact they have on the individual.

It is interesting to note, however, that the Dale considered that it was the company who did not appreciate the value of William rather than the William not being able to add value.

Jeremy said that he thinks 'there's probably plenty of wise people around who we are not accessing because they are not valued or understood or known or in the right place'.

Dale said he preferred not to be lead by 'authoritarian leaders'. These leaders tend to be very directive and prone to controlling (Dubrin & Dalglish, 2003). When he was describing William he was aware that he was also describing the 'kind of person I work best under'.

Moving on to the Cathy's discussion regarding her wise leaders who were Willard, Wilson, Wagner and Whitney. She was one of the more talkative participants and she was able to easily describe four significant people in her work life who she regarded as wise leaders. Cathy was unique in that she was the only one who mentioned a family member (her

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father) as a wise leader. She had two significant wise leaders early in her working life. Willard was her employer when she was in high school and through university. Wilson was her employer when she first graduated. She describes both as being 'like father figures'.

She got to know Willard and Wilson and their families at a personal level. She still keeps in contact with both of them and it has been 22 and 13 years respectively since she was first employed by them. Willard and Wilson, however, are described as very different characters. Willard is an entrepreneur who bought and sold businesses. While not an outwardly strong person, he is described as being 'a really strong character, really confident, really engaging in any discussion'. Cathy reflected that while Willard has a very straightforward style of communication, she has never taken offence to any advice he has given her. That advice could be on a wide variety of issues including work and career. In her words Willard 'communicated in a way that is gentle, it's strong but also gentle so there's a caring element.' He was later described as running his various businesses 'like a family'.

Willard taught her about elements to the business that were not directly related to her role and he also taught her about business in general. This is similar to Wilson who, once he had employed her, took her through an apprenticeship-type process. This ensured that she learnt about all aspects of the business. Unlike her previous example, Wilson is not entrepreneurial but has had senior management and general management roles within organisations. She described him as 'rather assertive and strong... a little bit tough'.

Cathy imagined that others may think Wilson is a bit too tough to be considered wise. However, she finds him 'one of the softest blokes' she knows. His style of leadership differs from Willard in that, rather than treat his staff like family, Wilson often prefers to

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create 'a bit of a power profile'. He does this by 'cleaning out' some of the incumbent staff when he starts a new role. Cathy goes on to say that this is not really her style. This has resulted in her tempering some of Wilson's advice to suit her personal style better.

Cathy had less to say about her dad, Waldo, as one of her wise leaders. Waldo was described as 'incredibly conservative, polite, gentle, intelligent and he does not really give me advice he more insinuates'. She described him as being very loyal to his company and that is something she feels she has learnt from him as she sees it is a way of building knowledge. Later in the interview she says that she listened to Waldo simply 'because he was my father'.

When asked about this comment the Cathy goes on to further explain: 'I think he's given me quite a lot of advice that I haven't agreed with but I've still taken the direction he's given me.' Upon reflection she's not sure she has found Waldo's advice good advice and is even questioning her strong feelings of loyalty to the organisations she works for. She has recently wondered if this loyalty has had a negative impact on her career. Her loyalty may have resulted in her missing out on a few potentially great career opportunities as Cathy describes it 'other opportunities that would pay a lot more and would be better for my development'.

Cathy's final wise leader, Whitney, is her current manager. Cathy is one of only two participants to include a current manager in her descriptions of a wise leader. She describes Whitney as a 'strong woman' who is 'incredibly articulate'. Whitney's articulate ability is one of the things she most admires as the Cathy often goes to Whitney for coaching on staff matters. While Cathy knows that she can not replicate what she is told, she can certainly 'pick up key words'. Whitney is described as being able to pick up concepts very quickly and seemingly able to provide counselling and coaching in areas that

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she may not even have direct experience in. She is also described as ‘Colourful and eccentric and assertive, caring’. And while Whitney describes herself as not caring and affiliative, Cathy finds her to be both of these.

Cathy finds Whitney worth listening to and ‘hangs on every word she says’ which she is finding a welcome change as she has not experienced that level of respect for her previous two managers. She likes talking to Whitney about strategic and conceptual issues and appreciates that their conversations are kept at that higher level. With Whitney, Cathy feels that they are quite similar in personality as in ‘extroverted and assertive’. Whitney is also noted for her age as she is not much older than the Cathy herself.

Cathy credits Willard, Wilson and Wagner as having a significant impact on her career. She feels she has progressed to roles of greater responsibility much quicker than she had anticipated. The value here is not in problem solving or behavioural change but the opportunity to discuss presenting issues within a philosophical frame

With Jeremy I found his responses were slower to elicit and he seemed to have less he wanted to say on any of the subjects discussed. It did not seem that he was not willing to talk even though I often left pauses in the conversation. As a result, I often found that I needed to prompt him by asking for more explanation regarding the statements he made. At the time of the interview I felt quite uncomfortable doing this, however, after reflecting on the transcripts, it does not seem to have hindered the potential value of the content.

Jeremy is unique in that he describes the only wise leader (other than the brief mention of the ‘celebrity’ leader) that he has not directly reported to at least at some point in their relationship. Winslow is his manager’s manager so some of the Jeremy’s opinions and impressions have been formed through listening to his manager talk about Winslow.



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He said he would describe Winslow as having ‘humour’ and being an ‘extremely charming man’. Winslow was well respected and ‘able to build rapport with all sorts of people.’

Jeremy described Winslow as having ‘a sharp wit’ with a ‘bit of a sting in his tail’.

However, he did temper this by saying that Winslow only rarely showed this side which he believes was therefore ‘quite judiciously used’.

Winslow was described as having a wide range of interests and friendships. Jeremy also said that Winslow ‘seemed to have a lot of empathy for people who were less fortunate so he did a lot of pushing for some philanthropic activity in the organisation’.

Another interesting observation was that Winslow was not only respected by his team but also liked by many in the organisation. Jeremy further speculated that this ‘makes it easier to give your view or impart wisdom, if people come and they genuinely like dealing with you and they seek you out... then they will happily look to them for guidance.’

For Jeremy one of the most significant factors that Winslow achieved was to raise the reputation of Jeremy’s department within the organisation. This resulted in the team being more integrated into the business than Jeremy had experienced in the past. Winslow created a relaxed place to work and a team environment that made the Jeremy feel a part of the organisation as a whole. He described the environment as ‘easily the best I’ve ever experienced’ because he felt so integrated.

Not every participant was given the opportunity to work very long with their wise leaders. Blake, in particular, was only able to spend about 3–4 months with either Walcott or Wyatt before they were both ‘moved on to bigger and better things’. However, Blake did say that with Walcott he felt he learned ‘five years worth of learnings’ in those short months.

Walcott is described as a ‘strong leader, a type of “lead from the front type” of individual,

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not afraid to get their hands dirty'. Walcott was also willing to take the time to provide advice on a wide range of areas 'like career, life and everything in between'.

Not only did Walcott have a wealth of knowledge and experience but he was also willing to share this with Blake who was just a recent graduate. He also describes Walcott as seeming to take pride in seeing others develop and move on to other opportunities.

Walcott did not just seem to be interested in his own success. Blake again mentioned that he appreciated how Walcott would take the time to develop him by explaining how his work was supporting the organisation's goals and not just be watching the clock to see if it was home time. Because Walcott took the time to do this, Blake believed that he was able to get the best out of his team.

Walcott is described as 'confident' and 'decisive'. He has a 'wealth of knowledge' and a 'range of experience'. Blake described Walcott as 'willing to accept different people and different ideas as well, so [he was] flexible.' While he described both Walcott and Wilson driven to success, in the same sentence he also described them as being empathetic.

The feedback he received from the Walcott, he found, was both sensitive to the level of effort he put in as well as constructive. So, like other participants, he appreciated even negative feedback and felt it was presented in a way that did not cause offence. He felt that the feedback was constructive and buoyed his confidence he was offered ways he could improve without feeling like he was 'getting a whack for [mistakes].'

Blake's second experience with a wise leader was again for a limited time before the person was promoted. He described Wyatt as being 'a good leader because [he] was open and flexible'. Wyatt empowered his people and his approach was 'relaxed and friendly'.

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Because of this, the Blake felt he was able to approach Wyatt with 'new ideas, concerns, queries whatever it may be... without fearing that I'd look like an idiot'.

Blake also believes that another of Walcott and Wyatt's strengths was in communication. Blake explains that as we are being bombarded with so much information all the time from so many different sources it can be hard to determine what is important. Wyatt is described as 'a strong communicator' who could sort through all the information and determine what was important. Wyatt also took the time to help the Blake understand how his work fits into 'the bigger picture' and how his work positively impacts on the business as a whole. So rather than just telling Blake to get on with his work, Wyatt took the time to explain which for Blake made him feel as if he was working in a collaborative environment.

Wyatt had been Blake's direct manager until recently. Wyatt has now been promoted within the company and Blake now has a lot less interaction with him. Since being moved out of his department Blake now feels his opinion of Wyatt has changed in some areas and 'not necessarily always in a positive light'. While he does not believe Wyatt's values have changed, he has been impacted by the Wyatt's change in priorities.

Penny realised that she more than her initial two wise leaders as she began to think about what she believes a wise leader is, so as the interview progressed she was able to discuss four people that she would describe as wise. The first two wise leaders, Wyman and Waldo, Penny initially discussed together. She described them as being from 'different age groups but just very calm, challenged you a little bit, would push your thought, really about making you to be honest with yourself'. Wyman and Waldo pushed her to think beyond her usual thought processes. She felt that 'A number of people will challenge and

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question what you say or what you think but there's just something in the way they do it that it's...very subtle but very effective.'

Penny goes on to describe how both of Wyman and Waldo have had a significant influence on the way she works. Penny then described Waldo in greater detail. Penny said that the relationship she had with Waldo was quite different from her other wise leaders and it is even quite different from the relationships described by the other participants. When working for Waldo, Penny found that he worked so differently from what she was used to, and this in turn forced her to work differently. At the time she remembered questioning Waldo's sanity and even shared with the Human Resources director that she felt he just had 'no idea'. So it is only with 'hindsight that I almost look at [him] and think that they had a far greater influence than at the time I thought he did'.

Waldo was only in the business for approximately 12 months. During that time Penny found that his leadership style was very different from anything else she was familiar with as it was much more relaxed and 'hands off'. 'There were times', she explains, 'that I questioned his sanity'. However, what she discovered was that he had been entrusting her with greater autonomy which she had unknowingly grown to enjoy and appreciate. It was not until he left that she was able to understand and value what he had taught her. Waldo's style of management, however, is one she now actively endeavours to utilise in her own leadership style. This may suggest that the relationship between a follower and a wise leader may take time to develop.

Waldo is described as being 'very experienced, very mature'. His style of leadership 'was very hands off and really gave you room to do things'. Penny found him to be very trusting and now realises that because he was so perceptive and very aware of what was going on so he could assess just how much he could trust his staff. This style did not suit

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her initially. She talks about feeling confused after talking with him because it seemed like he was not interested in her. This was very different from her previous manager who had been very 'hands on' and yet she had found that irritating.

Penny believes that because Waldo was so confident in his role and because 'he was not there to prove anything' he was able to allow 'you to come up with the answers' in a discussion. So Waldo's style seemed to confuse her while at the same time she found it comfortable because of his approach to the role. While she now regards him as a wise leader she is not sure that others in her team regarded him as such. This, she believed, could be due to two factors. Firstly that some of the people in the team were very experienced people 'who maybe weren't quite so open to the wisdom of others'. And secondly, she described the organisation she was working in as very well established and the staff tend to be suspicious of anyone who came from outside of their industry and even outside of their organisation.

During the interview Penny also mentioned another manager that she works with and for whom she has much respect. However, as she talked about him she decided that she could not classify him as a wise leader. This was because, for her, a wise leader 'is all rounded but there's some aspects of [this manager] that I don't give [him] that category'. She believed that while you could have respect for the manager and even hold them in high esteem it is not just about what they know 'but also the way they go about sharing it and delivering it...and the way they mentor' and the way they treat people.

The fourth wise leader Penny mentioned, Whittaker, is someone she worked with much earlier in her career. While he started out as the manager that employed her, as Penny progressed through the company he ended up as a colleague. Since leaving the organisation they have maintained contact and she regards him as a friend. She describes

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him as being quiet and unassuming, ‘who knows something about everything.’ She believes that he is not out for personal gain so he was ‘eager’ to talk about anything including advice about technical issues and careers. She finds him to be ‘that real, open, honest kind [of person].’

While working with Whittaker, Penny had the opportunity to spend significant time working on relatively stressful projects that required a great deal of discretion. Having chosen Whittaker to join her on the project Penny was made aware just how much she could not only trust Whittaker with confidential information but also how much she could trust his advice.

Stopping in her descriptions of her wise leaders Penny felt that she may be suggesting these people were infallible and that she was ‘putting them on a pedestal’. While she is trying to say that the wise leaders are the ‘whole package’ she also wishes to make it clear that ‘they’re not perfect... but if I wanted really good advice I would have gone to any of the three of them.’

She continued with her descriptions by explaining how she found that wise leaders allow you to ask questions without making you ‘feel like you’re an idiot’. On the contrary, her fourth wise leader, Wheeler, took care to be sensitive to her regarding responding to her queries. She tells the story of the first meeting she was in with Wheeler. Penny was new to the industry and during the meeting she asked a question that was brushed aside by the speaker. Later in the meeting, Wheeler came back to the question, explained it more fully and then checked with her to see if she was clear on the matter. She said that he managed to do all this without embarrassing her and she not only appreciated how he did it but also that he thought it important enough to remember to do it and respond.

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Penny believes that the wisest people take the time, as Wheeler did, to explain what they know and to treat you with respect as they do so. According to Penny ‘what’s the purpose of that knowledge if they don’t share it?’ She wonders if one of the reasons they are able to explain things so well is because they are not ‘arrogant so they are happy to share their knowledge’.

The next participant, Pamela, only spoke of one wise leader. Wendy had been her manager in one company and then, when Wendy moved companies, she asked Pamela to join her. Even though the role Wendy offered was only on a temporary basis, Pamela chose to join her. Wendy is described as ‘being like a mother figure to everyone’. This would seem to tie in with the Pamela’s description of herself and how she describes herself as having ‘old fashioned values’ when it comes to work and that wisdom comes with respect.

Wendy is described as knowing her work, her company and her customers. She is also described as a ‘caring, nurturing person’ who was ‘always open to share her experiences or talk about yours.’ Penny also talked about the importance of relationship in getting to know a wise leader. She feels it takes time to build the trust necessary for the relationship to develop. Penny felt able to discuss business and personal matters with Wendy although she was aware that it was important not to just take any matter to Wendy as ‘she wouldn’t take any rubbish’.

Wendy created a team that ‘gelled’. The team proved so strong that by the time Wendy left the team had been together for about 7–10 years. Unfortunately, when the new managers took over the role from Wendy the team were no longer valued and were no longer well represented and ‘backed up’ to the management team as Wendy had done. The entire team left within two years.

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While Penny really values Wendy's friendship and input she has received, Penny has not 'looked' for another wise leader in her new role. The reason for this, she explains, is that she 'had a bad experience with a manager so I have tended to step back a little bit.' It came out later in the interview that she has had a series of three bad experiences with consecutive managers. Penny also says that her current manager is younger than she is so she does not expect much as she believes wisdom 'comes with age'.

Initially this next participant, Mindy, began describing some managers she had worked for that had elements of what she defines as wisdom. These people were creative people who were 'so smart that they can lift themselves up from the problem at hand and be able to look around them and go "oh, that bit over there might be relevant and that's also a bit like that bit over here and I can relate that in some way"'. However, as she talked she began to refine her thoughts in regards to what she considers to be a wise leader and began to describe a woman who she had worked for that was a combination of all the things she had previously mentioned in that she was 'intelligent', 'able to socialise', able to share their knowledge, and able to 'join the dots of even unrelated kind of concepts'.

Wanda is described as being really good at her job and able to quickly 'assess what's going on' by being aware of her surroundings and people. While only a few years older than Mindy, Wanda has a broad range of experience and education. She is described as being both friendly and able to 'put her foot down when need be', a great leader who is also a mentor. Calm and consistent, she also would 'vent' at times and was not 'nice all the time' but this only served to make her 'look like a real person'. Able to work well in different settings, including 'very senior boys club type men' Wanda was also able to maintain her identity and as Mindy said she 'was not having to just be a hard-arsed, I am a man/woman but could actually still be herself and still be respected'. Mindy said how she really liked the fact that Wanda didn't feel that to gain respect she would need to hide her femininity.



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Mindy found Wanda to be very approachable when she had more technical issues such as matters of strategy and interpersonal issues. Mindy was able to describe a situation regarding the decision to not pursue a difficult client. Having taken the issue to Wanda, Mindy was confident that her concerns were heard and that her proposal for resolution suitably assessed and accepted. Wanda showed her support and trust of the Mindy by responding 'I think you're right, go ahead...do you want help?'

Wanda also created a 'good culture in the team' by ensuring the team would get together and socialise. As this was a very busy work environment, time had to be scheduled in to ensure it happened. By doing this Mindy felt that it increased the team's awareness that they were not alone and that others were facing the same issues which built a 'sense of camaraderie'. Wanda also encouraged her team to take time out from their busy schedules in order to gain a better work-life balance. However she has had issues with this herself. While re-building the agency back to being successful as it had before the previous manager, 'her health suffered as a result' because of the long hours she worked.

Mindy is very fond of Wanda and has developed a friendship with her that has lasted beyond their time of working together. Mindy not only regularly gets together with her for social activities because she finds her interesting but has also invited her to her wedding.

One of the more intriguing wise leaders that was presented was a manager who Charlie got to work with in his first role from university. Working the night shift together Charlie and Wilbur were able to spend 'a lot of quality time together'. Wilbur had been in a very senior role in a large company and had decided to make a significant change in his life. He left his job, moved, and bought a small farm. In order to help with cash flow he had taken a position that was well below his previous roles as an interim measure until his farm was financially sustainable.

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Wilbur is described as 'very considered' and 'very aware of people and the human relation aspect'. While Charlie described him as 'a cranky old bastard' he also says that because of Wilbur's self-awareness 'he knew he was a cranky old bastard and he could separate those two'. As a result of Wilbur's self awareness Charlie felt that the advice he was given was not tainted by the Wilbur's current personal issues such as his performance issues.

However, Charlie is not sure that everyone who worked with Wilbur had the opportunity to see through the 'cranky' exterior.

As Charlie was 'a young whipper-snapper' Wilbur took him 'under his wing'. The advice given included areas like management and leadership. One example, and this was the only specific sample of sage advice provided in all the interviews, was the first piece of advice Wilbur gave Charlie and is something that he still uses when he coaches and mentors, some 26 years later. The advice provided was:

If anyone reports to you and comes to you and says that their solution is 80% the way you'd go about doing it yourself you just say 'get on with it' because that last 20% by trying to strive to get that level of detail will just take it away from being their initiative to becoming yours.

The lesson Charlie draws from this is:

[T]he objective of you as a leader or manager is to enable, to engage, to empower by having people want to do things and feel that it's their own rather than being told.

Another key theme to Wilbur's advice concerns 'life going forward and... the work life balance aspects you have to watch out for'. While Charlie remembers and appreciates this advice, he found that he has only truly learnt from it as he has gotten older himself and learned the lessons 'the hard way'. He explains this by going through various stages of his

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life and identifying his delayed realisations about what his focus should really be.

However, he suggests that because he's gone through the experience himself and reflected and learned from it, it makes him a wiser leader himself.

Initially, Wilbur was the shift manager and Charlie reported to him. However, through some structural changes and some underperforming by Wilbur, Charlie became his manager over the five years they worked together. Part of Charlie's role as Wilbur's manager was that Charlie had to work through the issue that it was time for Wilbur to retire. Doing this may have been devastating to their relationship but Charlie describes it as still strong 'in a personal sense but one that was not necessarily that engaging or positive from a career or work point of view.' Even through the process of Charlie moving Wilbur out of the company, Charlie felt that Wilbur 'could separate those perspectives and still have a very good heart-to-heart with a high degree of wisdom'.

For Fiona, her description of her wise leader does not seem to have the depth of awareness that the other participants were able to offer. Fiona is also the only participant that has never had a role where she has managed other people. Wade is her manager's manager and she has reported to him directly for several months during a period of staff movement. It was during that time that she got to know him well and to understand his leadership style. She thinks she would have got to know him in time but reporting directly to him sped the process up significantly.

Wade was described as a risk taker who is 'calm under fire'. Not always staying calm though, he is known as someone who 'swears a lot' but he would get over it quickly and gets back to the job. One of the key elements she appreciated about him is that he was able to use his experience to apply to issues as they arise. He also had the ability to see problems from different perspectives which often means he can simplify the issues down

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to their core elements. One of his favourite sayings was ‘how hard can it be?’ She believes he was able to be an effective leader because he understood the job they are doing and also because he was able to laugh at himself.

When faced with a problem such as a customer complaint, the team tended to solve it within themselves but if that was not possible they would take it to Wade. Before going to him, though, Fiona ensured that she had done all the preparation first because she was aware that he was very busy and does not want to ‘deal with all the inane day-to-day crap’. Fiona felt that his straight forward manner suited her as she described herself as possessing similar qualities and prefers to work the same with others.

Fiona believed that Wade would be considered as wise by others and one of the reasons is that ‘He’s in a senior management role because he’s worked hard to get there...he’s earned being there.’ This also impacts his ability to stand up for the team with the more senior managers.

The last participant, Rodger, described four wise leaders he has worked for. Three of the wise leaders he described together because he sees that they had a lot in common. The fourth wise leader was quite different from the other three in significant areas.

Rodger met his first wise leader, Walter, very early in his career and he took Rodger ‘under his wings’ and gave him ‘a number of opportunities to grow personally and professional[ly]’. Rodger described that the ‘leap of faith’ Walter took in his leadership of Rodger has had a significant impact on his life and his career. Walter was a strong listener who was ‘always generous about imparting his knowledge’ who was interested in Rodger as a whole person and not just an employee. While Walter provided personal input into the Rodger’s life, the relationship was never ‘social’ only ‘professional’. As Rodger discussed

how Walter had entrusted him with highly confidential information he realised that he feels that wise leaders 'have an ability to understand, relatively easily, where the boundaries should be for trust and they can flex in and out depending on circumstances'.

Rodger goes on to say that the first three wise leaders have the 'highest calibre integrity that I can think of'. They were reserved individuals, as in they were quiet and even-tempered, and who were in charge of very complex business functions. Rodger provides insight as to how he felt when he was working for Wayne when he talked about how the Wayne was able to let 'people go forward without letting the people fall into a bear trap just by...drawing on his experiences and providing counsel to me so that ultimately [I] wouldn't fail'. This gave him a sense of confidence supported by the fact that he felt he could always call on Wayne if he got into difficulty.

These three wise leaders, he points out, were all involved in organisations outside of the work environment. He believed that this sort of activity improves leadership skills because it helps in improving communication and interpersonal skills.

The fourth wise leader that Rodger described was very different from his other three wise leaders. Where he described Walter, Watson and Wayne as having very high integrity, Wickham is 'not someone I would have regarded as a pillar of integrity'. While Rodger feels that wisdom can come with age, Wickham was less than 10 years older than him. As a leader, his motives were 'often questioned as being less than genuine, less than appropriate'. Describing Wickham as a complex person Rodger felt that if you were not working in close proximity with Wickham, his motives and actions may be difficult to anticipate or understand. He later goes on to explain that he had to get to know Wickham quite well before he was able to understand why he did the things he did. However,

Wickham took very little time to assess Rodger and decide that he was someone who had potential and to pick him to be on the Wickham's team for future projects.

Wickham was not much older than Rodger but he is described as having a remarkably broad set of knowledge and experience. Wickham's success was also quite unexpected because in an industry where the majority of people have qualifications, Wickham has none. His flamboyant style, however, did create a certain level of tension for Rodger who felt he had to 'constantly balance between these destructive aspects versus the positive aspects'. He sums up his opinion of Wickham with 'He built people up, he built teams.'

During the responses to this question regarding the characteristics of a wise leader, a number of participants made reference to leaders that they did not regard as wise. For any of those that did, I did not stop them but chose not to pursue that part of the discussion until the next question that more directly addresses the concept.

### **4.3 Describe an unwise leader**

In order to gain a clearer picture of what wise leadership is, the participants were asked to describe what they thought the opposite would be. This question was clarified as not being a leader they would simply not describe as wise, but a leader they would actually classify as unwise. The participants were also given the opportunity to describe a specific person. This question created some initial tension but only one participant preferred to respond theoretically rather than actually describing a specific individual. The results are interesting in that the type of people and the description of what they regard as an unwise leader do not result in a completely opposite picture of the participant's description of wise leaders.

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The unwise leaders were mainly fairly disliked by the participants but not universally. There are examples where they did think that the unwise leader had some positive attributes but these intended to be negated by significant flaws. The flaws described were not all found in each of the unwise leaders described but were often found in different combinations.

Mindy gave two examples of people she considered unwise leaders. The first she described as smart but with no interest in people. He was not able to 'share his smartness'. This unwise leader created a team that to her was very distant and she said he just did not have any people skills. She described one particular aspect of her unwise leader was that he appeared to have been told that it was important part of leadership to interact with his staff on a more personal level. She got the impression that because he had no people skills his attempts at interacting did not come across in an authentic manner. Her description went as follows: 'he would awkwardly come out of his office at about 1.15pm most days and awkwardly lean over the partition'. While she describes him as a nice person she said that he 'just couldn't connect with people'.

Her second unwise leader was judged as unwise for seemingly opposite reasons. Unlike the first example, this unwise leader had excellent interpersonal skills but was lacking in technical ability. So, if Mindy needed to seek out advice on a work issue the unwise leader was not about to add value to her. The result was that she found she did not respect his opinion. He also began to react to pressure from his managers by behaving in an unpredictable way with his staff where he would respond strongly to situations without any apparent build-up; it was likened to working 'with a time bomb'.

Another unwise leader nominated was also not disliked by the participant. Charlie was able to describe the unwise leader as being effective and 'very philosophical' if you got to

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know him. However, Charlie regards this manager as unwise because 'his approach to dealing with a business not performing overall was to get us all in a room...for a pig and chicken story' which meant that he was asking if they were fully committed or just contributing. The unwise leader then proceeded to lead by being 'very directive, very hands on, very over controlling'. Charlie suggests that while this approach can be effective in the short term for some situations it is not effective 'in a sustainable basis'.

In some of the examples, unwise leaders were described as being 'arrogant' and 'brutal'. Rodger felt that his two unwise leaders had '100% self-directed motivations' and had very little interest in helping anyone else. Fiona suggests that they lack the ability to 'simplify things' and who just reacts rather than 'think about the long term impact to the business'.

The picture Dale created of his unwise leader was of an imposing manager who, while located in a different country to Dale, wielded his power throughout his department with some quite devastating results. Described as being 'very competent commercially', the unwise leader appeared to be driven mainly by money and by the company bonus schemes. He regularly undermined his staff's authority by doing things like calling meetings with Dale's staff all without informing Dale first or inviting him to join the meetings. For Dale it was as if he 'just did not get people'. This unwise leader was in a very senior role in a large company who behaved in a bullying manner. According to Dale, 'it's easy to be a bully when you're the boss, [but] it's kind of cowardice.'

During the time the Dale worked with the unwise leader his team had a very high absentee rate and a high staff turnover. This type of leadership seemed to be not only condoned by the organisation but actually encouraged through the pay and bonus structure. The unwise leader was part of an organisation that had taken over the company Dale worked for. Due



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to the environment created by the unwise leader, Dale readily accepted the offer of redundancy.

Bullying, as seen in the previous example, was also evident in Pamela's unwise leaders. Both of her unwise leaders used different tactics to bully. She describes the first one: 'his way of trying to get you to step up to the mark was to actually belittle you and he'd do it in front of your team mates, never behind closed doors.' The second unwise leader would take older situations, even from before her tenure, and misrepresent the team's actions to senior management that resulted in the team getting into trouble. Her aggressive style was also evident in the way she would write new policies without consultation with her very experienced team and then insist they be implemented without concern for the consequences. This unwise leader gave Pamela the impression that her intent was to get rid of the existing team.

With the first unwise leader Pamela described him as knowing his business, his technical field and his customers 'but the way he treated staff and people in the company you just sat there and you just thought, well I thought he was an idiot'. However, the second unwise leader is described not only as incompetent with staff but also not particularly competent technically.

With Cathy's two examples of unwise leaders a different perspective emerged. These are the only two examples where the participant is the manager of the unwise leader not the follower. These two unwise leaders are described quite differently from the examples given by other participants. Whereas most of the other participants suggested that they did not particularly like their unwise leaders, Cathy makes it clear that she does like them. She describes them as lovely, caring people. Her criticism of these two unwise leaders is in their lack of being able to see the 'big picture'. They were described as being unable to

grasp concepts and therefore not able to ‘see how things impacted’ on the business. She found them to be very ‘fact-based’ and focused only the ‘here and now’. As leaders, all they did was ‘pass on information’ in a purely ‘transactional’ manner. When they did try to provide advice it tended to not be good advice and as a result they were not able to extend the skills of their team members. While they were both older and very experienced, Cathy found that they were not able to process their knowledge effectively which resulted in an inability to understand strategy. For Cathy, this meant that they had were not able to lead effectively.

The participants did not seem as willing to talk about unwise leaders as they had been with wise leaders. Jeremy, for example, chose not describe someone he had known but rather spoke in the abstract. The reduced amount of feedback may also be because I did not ask for the participants to elaborate. In retrospect, further discussion regarding what the participants perceive as unwise leadership may have provided interesting observations. This will be addressed further in the results and limitations sections.

#### **4.4 What impact do you think the wise leader has had?**

This response was often mixed in with their descriptions of their wise leaders (as discussed earlier). The answers to this question seemed to vary according to the depth of relationship the participant had with the wise leaders. For some the wise leader provided an example for the participant to want to emulate. This is evident in Mindy’s descriptions of Wanda with whom she spoke of in very positive terms. Wanda was described as being very intelligent, good at her job, friendly, approachable, open, warm and very supportive of her team creating a strong team environment. Mindy has taken specific elements of how Wanda led her team and has emulated those practices. For example Wanda insisted that everyone was to take a lunch break with the group once a week. Mindy felt that ensuring

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her team takes a break together is significant factor in building the team and so she has brought that practice into her team and is keen to do more.

Charlie felt that Wilbur had impacted his life profoundly and provided significant insight into many areas. Two key areas were interpersonal interactions and advice with his personal life. In regards to interpersonal interactions Charlie gave the only specific example of a repeated wise anecdote (mentioned earlier) that I was offered during the interviewing process. This anecdote was apparently one of many and had so impacted the Charlie, he describes it as having stuck to him forever, that he not only made use of the wisdom it espoused but also repeats it to his staff. The second significant aspect, of advice on his personal life, has been internalised by Charlie quite differently. While Charlie acknowledged it was sound advice based on Wilbur's own hard-earned life experience, Charlie only truly realised the value in stages and not as early as he would have liked. He reflects: 'geez after all the feedback you got from this person I still buggered it up'.

For Cathy, her four wise leaders have seemed to be more about providing advice than being role models. She describes Willard as an entrepreneur and a risk taker. Cathy, however, describes herself as less of a risk taker and has not taken the same type of career path. Rather, she has chosen to work within established companies. She describes Wilson as somewhat 'tough' and yet 'one of the softest blokes I know'. With Wilson she often listened to his advice and then toned it down to suit her own personal preferences. An example of this was in regards to when Wilson started in a new company 'he cleans the business out'. By this Cathy meant that Wilson would go through a process of removing older staff that were not in line with the new strategy he was bringing in. Cathy, on the other hand, prefers a gentler and caring approach. As a note regarding this, Cathy also described two situations where she had to do some 'cleaning' her self recently. However,

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she did so reluctantly and she felt it was handled more judiciously than how Wilson would have done himself.

Cathy was the only participant to mention a family member as in her father. She described him as much more reserved and conservative than her other wise leaders. When responding to the question of how Wagner had impacted her she said that she had not found his advice to be particularly helpful. The one aspect she said that was helpful was in regards to remaining loyal to your company. While she has taken that advice she also wonders if it might have actually hindered her career at times. So while she was able to provide examples of why she feels that her wise leaders were wise in three of her cases, she was not able to provide examples of helpful advice from her father. When she was asked about why she listened to Wagner her response was ‘my father I listened to because he was my father’.

Cathy’s fourth wise leader, Whitney, has had a more direct impact on Cathy’s daily activities. Whitney provided immediate leadership advice at a practical level. While Cathy admired Whitney, as with all her other wise leaders, there did not appear to be any effort to emulate her. It is reasonably obvious that Cathy has had her work, career direction and personal life greatly impacted by her wise leaders. It would seem that she actively seeks out wise leaders, and has done so from a young age, and has developed long term relationships with them. So, does this suggest she is the most receptive to developing a wise leader-follower relationship? This may, therefore, result in her not just being able to identify a number of wise leaders but also develop relationships that are of significant duration and perceived benefit.

One other participant chose to discuss four wise leaders. Unlike the previous participant, three of Penny’s wise leaders were people she worked with and did not have much contact

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with them outside of work. She has only one ongoing friendship with her wise leaders as in Wheeler. With Waldo, who she worked with for only 12 months, she says that because of the way he led her it has changed the way she leads others. This is in regards to the way in which he empowered her by allowing her the freedom to come up with solutions herself and follow them through. Waldo did not get involved with the day-to-day activities while still managing to be aware of what was going on in the company.

For Pamela, her relationship with Wendy was so cherished that when she was offered an opportunity to work with her for a second time she readily took up the offer even though initially it meant going to a less secure contractual role from a permanent one. Pamela is only new to leadership and while she has tried to emulate Wendy and create the same type of environment she enjoyed working for Wendy, she has found it difficult in the early stages.

The wise leader that would seem to have had the least impact on a participant would be the one relationship that had little direct contact. Winslow was Jeremy's manager's manager. They had little daily contact and then it was only briefly and had little to do with business. A significant amount of the impressions Jeremy had of Winslow had come through the Jeremy's manager. Jeremy actually said that he could not think how Winslow had had any impact on him other than to leave a good impression. This suggests that the Winslow was someone he could remember fondly but he has had little influence on Jeremy's career.

Jeremy further went on to explain that the most significant impact on his development had been a leadership training course he had attended a few years ago. As part of the training he received feedback from his team and that combined with the feedback from an assigned coach provided information that really challenged his impression of his leadership practices. Jeremy then went on to explain the various aspects of his leadership style he

needed to address. Upon reflection, the issues he raised, closely lined up with the same aspects he had identified as admiring in Winslow. For example some of the areas that he needed to address were ‘recognition, acknowledgement of my team and a little bit around strategy and direction’. He had described Winslow as being encouraging, was able to build his team’s reputation with the company and able to ‘direct people towards the key issues’.

The other participant who was not able to think of how his wise leaders impacted him was one of the two participants who were not currently leaders. With both of Blake’s wise leaders he described his interaction with them both as being seriously limited in regards to time spent working with them. Both of his wise leaders left their roles within months of his appointment so maybe he was not able to form the depth of relationship most of the others were able to.

### **4.5 Conclusion**

As the interviews were conducted as open interviews (Maylor & Blackmon, 2005) they were more like conversations. This has meant that I, as the researcher, had to determine what responses required further inquiry. Once transcribed, I have also had to determine what responses were relevant to which topics. This has been an ongoing process and one that I am not sure is ever truly completed.

## **5 Discussion**

I found when I asked each participant to describe what they thought were the characteristics of a wise person that while there was a diverse range of responses, there were some common themes. I have put these themes into sections however they often interrelated. Where this has occurred I have made reference to the other sections.

The descriptions of the wise leaders indicated no particular personality type. For example some wise leaders were described as introverts and others extroverts; some described as reserved and others eccentric; some quiet while others bubbly and fun loving. Therefore it would seem that to discover more about wise leadership it may be better to look at the activities and behaviours that have been raised by a number of participants when describing their experiences working with wise leaders. For ‘Wise persons are approximations to wisdom, but they are not wisdom’ (Baltes & Kunzmann, 2004, p. 290). So while I acknowledge that I am not looking for the ultimate wise leader I believe that there is a fundamental aspect to the practice of leadership that is worth investigating.

McKenna et al. (2009) have suggested that ‘wise action is often self evident, but usually only after the fact’ (p. 185). I found that in the process of reflecting on the interviews I was able to better understand what the participants were describing as wise leadership. In the stories shared, a picture developed.

### **5.1 Themes**

Some of the concepts I found woven throughout the descriptions are presented below. However, these concepts should not be seen as a type of checklist of what makes up a ‘wise leader’. The various concepts are not mentioned by every participant and there are some that are even contradictory. An example of this can be seen in the area of integrity.

While both stated and implied throughout the descriptions of wise leaders, there is also another example where Rodney said that Wickham's motives and his integrity were often questionable. Another example is in the area of career progression. A number of participants spoke about how their wise leader provided assistance in this area but it was not mentioned by everyone. However, it could be argued that even if not explicitly provided, the environment created by the wise leader for the participant to grow within their roles could have assisted in career progression.

Another problem with trying to 'fit' this data in a convenient checklist is that the descriptions of the wise leaders and the unwise leaders have significant overlap. Some of the unwise leaders have been described as intelligent and good at their jobs. Others have been described as 'caring and good at communication'. These concepts are also found in the wise leader's descriptions. One of the key differences would seem to be that, as Penny suggests, 'a wise person is all rounded but there's some aspects of [the unwise leader] that don't give [the unwise leader] that category:

And after having gone to great lengths to describe the positive attributes of their wise leaders, many participants felt the need to qualify their comments by making assurances that their wise leaders did not always make the right decisions or remain even tempered through all situations. As Penny said '...it's almost putting them on a pedestal and I'm not sure it's warranted!' Fiona described Wade as occasionally prone to 'losing the plot for brief periods of time'.

So it would appear that it is not appropriate to expect wise leaders to be without fault. However it is likely that it is possible to define a concept like leadership wisdom without trying to find or envisage a leader who is perceived as never making a mistake. This research is more about an endeavour to understand what is possible as 'the ideal of wisdom



can be aspired to and can be used as a standard to measure and evaluate' (McKenna et al., 2009, p, 178).

### **5.1.1 Emotional Intelligence**

Several participants identified a requirement for high emotional intelligence during the initial question regarding what they considered to be the characteristics of a wise person. This is a popular leadership term that can be defined simply as being intelligent about your own emotions, the emotions of others and the ability to manage them (Lindebaum, 2009). This is then defined further with a broad list of competencies as in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management (Goleman, Bouyatzi & McKee, 2002).

The area of emotional intelligence was brought up by the participants when they were describing a wise person although the term was not specifically mentioned during any of the descriptions of their wise leaders. It could be argued, however, that a number of the behaviours that were described by the participants do fit into this category. '[It] is now widely accepted that leadership is an emotion-laden process, and a leader who can manager his/her own emotions and have empathy for others will be more effective in the workplace' (Antonakis, Ashkanasy & Dasborough., 2009, p. 252).

Even though throughout the descriptions of wise leaders not all participants mentioned the term emotional intelligence specifically they all made reference to aspects of emotional intelligence. This could be due to emotional intelligence not having been well defined in research and literature resulting in a very broad array of concepts and traits (Matthews, Roberts, & Zeidner, 2004). However, many others suggest it is an essential element of leadership (Antonakis et al. 2009). For example, leaders with higher levels of emotional

intelligence may play a critical role in enabling followers to realise their creative abilities in areas like idea generation and implementation (Zhou & George, 2003).

The wise leaders have been described as 'calm', 'patient', 'down to earth' and 'consistent'. Even when in difficulty Fiona suggests that Wade had a 'calm under fire' manner. This personal calm is even described by some participants as being projected onto their environment by creating a relaxed atmosphere to work in.

The picture described by the participants of the wise leaders was one of a caring, nurturing and supportive leader who took the time to coach and mentor them. The empathetic approach would seem to have created an enabling and supportive environment. These affiliative styles led the participants to see the wise leaders as being interested in them. As Rodger said that he felt Walter was interested in him 'not only as an employee but also as a person.' Their approachable manner resulted in the participants feeling they could go to them at any time and present new ideas without concern that they would be made to feel like 'an idiot'. Even when Wanda said that she was not caring, Cathy felt that she was based on Wanda's action alone.

This did not mean, however, that they felt they could just walk in on the wise leader at any time. On the contrary, a number of participants said that they would not just take any problem to the wise leader. For example, Fiona described what seems to be a respect for Wade's time, so problems were taken to him only when she had tried to resolve them herself and then only when she felt she was well prepared with all the information she would need. She did not come across as being fearful but she demonstrated more of an attitude of honouring the wise leader and valuing his time and input he offered.

These characteristics of being calm, patient, caring, nurturing and supportive may all be significant factors in the development of an environment of trust that many of the participants mention. This environment of trust was not just that the followers felt that they could trust their wise leaders but also that the wise leaders indicated that they trusted the followers. This is seen in Roger's interview when he said that Walter 'trusted me implicitly.'

Providing a safe environment may be significant for a follower to be receptive to recognising wisdom in a leader. For Pamela, after having been through a succession of three rather dysfunctional and abusive managers, she had not found any wise leaders for a while because she needed time to feel safe within an organisation before she find a wise leader. For her, a wise leader is one that is part manager and part friend.

The level of trust a follower has for their leader can seriously impact a leader's influence (Burke, Sims, Lazzara & Salas, 2007) and can also impact the level of relationship in the leader-member exchange (LMX) (Werbel & Henriques, 2009). Creating a consistency between what the leader is saying and what the leader does impacts on trust, satisfaction, performance and follower integrity (Palanski & Yammarino, 2009). Rodger, when describing how Walter trusted him 'implicitly', found that for him 'trust is something wise leaders form...an ability to understand, relatively easily, where the boundaries should be for trust and they can flex in and out depending on circumstance and individual'. The suggestion that a leader needs to flex depending on 'circumstance and individual' is indicative of the contextual nature of leadership wisdom (McKenna et al., 2009).

It would appear that wise leaders saw a potential in the participants even if the participants did not see it themselves. In doing this, the participants describe a significant impact to their careers. As Rodger went on to say: 'There is no doubt that if [Walter] had not taken

that leap of faith all those years ago my life professionally and personally would have taken me to a different place to what it is today.’ And it does not just appear to be simply providing opportunities but also nurturing the participants in their careers. This can be seen when Rodger explains further that ‘[he] took me under his wings when I was an up and coming executive’.

While the aspect of integrity was raised by a few of the participants, it was not raised as often as I had expected. Several participants described their wise leaders as being ‘ethical’, ‘open’, ‘honest’ and with ‘high values’. Dale summed up his impression that ‘Integrity in leadership...is paramount.’ Stacey & Griffin describe it is even more fundamental in that ‘Leadership is... essentially about ethics’ (2005, p. 11).

So while it may not have been specifically mentioned by all the participants, integrity may be an implied aspect to wise leaders. A number of participants mentioned that their wise leader was in the role because they ‘deserved’ to be. This can be contrasted with the description of some of the unwise leaders who, it was suggested, did not have the necessary skills to do the job properly but were put into the role for reasons that were not performance related. As will be discussed, I did not pursue the topic of the unwise leader as much as perhaps I should have so I did not get the participants to explain what they meant when it was suggested the unwise leaders were inappropriately appointed into more senior roles.

The issue of integrity becomes less clearly defined in Rodger’s description of Wickham. Rodger went into detail regarding how three of his four wise leaders behaved with high integrity in order to highlight that Wickham’s integrity was often in question. This left Rodger with the feeling that ‘[he] had to constantly balance between these destructive aspects verses the positive aspects’. This may suggest that during the interview process I

## Discussion

did not get a clear distinction between wise leadership and effective leadership. I left it to the participants to determine their definition of wisdom and apply that to people they would consider to be wise leaders. This may mean that there is an overlap with the two concepts or that there needs to be a clearer distinction made.

On four occasions the wise leaders were described as being the 'team hero'. As the representative, or spokesperson, for the participant's team to more senior managers, they felt it important that the wise leader took the role of hero for their team. Being careful to describe the wise leader as an advocate for the team there was some effort to also explain that the wise leader was reasonable and not pugnacious about representing the views and needs of the team.

Jeremy described how Wilbur did much in building the reputation of their team throughout the organisation. Being part of a department that is often at odds with the core business of the organisation, Wilbur built the department's reputation in regards to the value they could add. This resulted in Jeremy feeling he was part of the business. He also went on to say that this is the most integrated he has ever felt in any organisation he has worked in.

Altruistic behaviours and motivations may be evident in the participant's descriptions of the wise leaders. This is both in the declared and in the implied elements of their descriptions. Penny describes that Wheeler's motivation was that he was 'not in it for himself' and that she finds wise leaders to be 'very unassuming, not arrogant, nothing to prove, not looking to gain themselves.' The implied altruistic behaviours can also be found in the descriptions of those who have longer term relationships with their wise leaders. In these relationships the participants describe on-going coaching and mentoring even after they have left the organisation, sometimes even years later. Jeremy said that Wilbur 'appeared to take pride in seeing others develop and was not just worried about his

own career.’ It would seem that they value the success of the participants so they put time and effort into leading and developing them. Altruism and the development of followers has been described as being a significant element to effective leaders in a number of different leadership theories including servant (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006) and legacy leadership (Whittington et al., 2005).

This selfless style would seem to create an environment where the needs of the participants, the team and the organisation are able to be more clearly defined and dealt with as, according to Charlie, that wise leaders are ‘able to take their own issues out of a situation’. As Avolio & Gardner (2005) suggest, when discussing the fundamental elements of authentic leadership, that when leaders are able to understand themselves and the organisation they are better able to make sound choices.

Charlie described Wilbur as coming to the end of his career and only working because he needed money to fund his new farm. Charlie also described Wilbur as being very self-aware, ‘he understood his own personality and that behaviours and attitudes can change and circumstances. He could actually see through that to the bigger picture’ and exhibited the kind of self awareness that is one of the basic concepts of emotional intelligence (Goleman et al., 2002).

The majority of the participants said that their wise leaders were also at least competent at their jobs with some describing their wise leader as outstanding. Burke et al. (2007) suggest that ‘In order to arrive at a decision to trust, individuals must compare the trust target (as in leader) against some referent (as in effective leadership)’ (p. 611). Therefore, if the participants do believe their wise leaders are doing their jobs effectively and leading effectively, they are more likely to trust their wise leaders.

### 5.1.2 Knowledge and Experience

While it has been suggested by McKenna et al. (2009) that the focus of wisdom research is more concerned with how individuals act rather than what they know, it would seem from the participants in this study made significant reference to what wise people know. This can be seen when the participants describe wise people as being both knowledgeable and experienced. Although this could be seen more that the wise leaders are distinguished not just for their knowledge and experience but by the way they process these aspects and then apply them.

Almost without exception, the wise leaders were described as experienced, intelligent and knowledgeable. The participants expected functional competence and Mindy, for example, described Wanda as being 'good at her job' with 'an enormous wealth of knowledge in terms of business[es]'. This does not mean the wise leaders were described being the best at every aspect of the business function that they are responsible for, however. On the contrary, participants stated clearly that they did not expect the wise leaders to be expert in all things. Penny felt that what wise leaders were able to do was being 'good at knowing what you know and knowing what you don't know' and somewhat mysteriously, 'they just know a lot about a lot of things'. This may also be related to intuition which will be discussed later.

It was indicated throughout the interviews that the wise leaders not only had a broad range of experience but it was also about how they do applied the experience and what they had learnt from those experiences. Penny suggests that, for her, a wise leader is able to accept that they make mistakes, learn from them and move on. This is reminiscent of Senge's (1999) suggestion that we do not learn from our mistakes unless we are prepared to analyse and assess them.

## Discussion

A number of participants said that they thought of older people when asked what they thought of as a wise person. However, during the second question regarding what they thought are the characteristics of a wise leader there were a number of times participants commented if the wise leader was only a few years older as themselves. This may have been surprising to the participants because followers tended to have a perception that someone who is of similar age may not have earned the right to be their leader (Kearny, 2008). This suggests that while the participants expected age to be significant, in practice age does not appear to be a limiting factor in acquiring wisdom..

This is confirmed by Webster (2003) who noted that age has not been shown to have an impact on measures of wisdom. However, Pamela said that she did not expect her current manager to be wise because he was younger than her. As this perception would seem to have had an influencing factor on Pamela's expectations it does indicate that the follower has an impact on leadership wisdom which will be discussed later. There could be mitigating factors that may result in wise leaders being older. For example one aspect that has been raised for both wisdom and wise leaders is that they have a lot of knowledge and experience.

Most of the wise leaders were described as 'intelligent' by the participants. While intelligence can be beneficial to leadership (Antonakis, et al., 2009) intelligence is not directly linked to wisdom (Webster, 2003). Hence, when looking at leadership wisdom, it may be necessary to have a broader definition of the concept than what would be found in the definitions of wisdom.

The majority of the participants, when talking about their wise leaders, made reference to an ability in the way the wise leaders think. Jeremy described how he felt his wise leader was able to process information was 'I don't think you have to be a genius but it's the way



you think'. Mindy said that 'I think they can join the dots of even unrelated kinds of concepts'. This application of thought is described by McKenna et al. as 'Wisdom brings discernment, clarity and knowledge to bear on complexity and unpredictability' (2009, p. 185). The participants seem to find the way their wise leaders were able to integrate seemingly disparate concepts a valuable skill that provided unique and useful insights into work situations.

The participants described the wise leaders as not only having the ability to understand issues but also as having a 'breadth of thinking'. Mindy described wise leaders as being able to 'lift themselves up from the problem at hand and be able to look around them and go "oh, that bit over there might be relevant and that's also a bit like that over here and I can relate that in some way."' This particular concept raised by most of the participants was one many tried to explain but seemed to find difficult to define. For example, Penny said that Waldo had the ability to stay 'right on to things without appearing to' and that he was 'quite perceptive, you did not realise how much he was aware of but was always aware of what was going on.' It almost seems the wise leaders have an all-knowing, all-seeing ability. A number of participants suggested that their wise leaders were not interested in the details but, at the same time, understood what was happening.

This may also be achieved through viewing issues from different perspectives and also having the ability to absorb and evaluate information from past and present situations. As has been determined, the wise leaders have generally been described as intelligent as with Wanda who was described as having 'a very fast mind... [who] could link all those kind of concepts together very quickly and have the benefit of her experiences at her fingertips'. Wade was described as being able to distil experience 'and equate them to each other and understand why things have happened and what it means for another situation'.

This way of thinking would seem to be in line with what Hodgkinson, Sadler-Smith, Claxton and Sparrow (2009) suggest as intuition. They define intuition as ‘a judgement for a given course of action that comes to mind with an aura or conviction of rightness or plausibility, but without clearly articulated reasons or justifications – essentially “knowing” but without knowing why’ (p. 279).

Most wise leaders were described as strategic thinkers. This was further explained as not only the wise leaders taking the time to see the ‘big picture’ but are also identify and separate any of their own personal issues that may influence a decision. By doing this, the wise leaders are described as being able to be sensitive to the needs of others and the potential long-term ramifications of decisions made. This seems to confirm that wise leaders are not so much looking at the immediate concerns but to the overall strategy.

While the wise leader is described as being able to think conceptually, they are also described as being able to apply their experiences and knowledge to current issues. This ability would seem to be one of the highest valued attributes the participants mention. This application is not just related to technical issues but also to interpersonal and personal matters.

Penny summarised her impression of her wise leaders as

‘wise people don’t have a need to know everything. They don’t think they know everything. They are happy to impart what they know but they are also happy to learn off those around them and they are happy to accept that other people know more than they do and that’s a good thing’.

The ability to identify your knowledge level and to be comfortable with it was also raised.

In contrast, unwise leaders were described by Pamela as people who ‘either think they know everything or think they need to know everything’

While most participants mentioned that their wise leaders were good at their job, not always the best at every aspect of the role, but certainly ‘competent’, there was a possible exception to this when Charlie described having to work with Wilbur through the process of accepting he needed to retire due to performance issues. However, Charlie felt that Wilbur’s poor performance was only due to age and because he was not really interested in working any more because he was in the process of developing a farm he was ‘burning the candle at both ends’. So while this would appear to be an example of a wise leader who was not good at his job, Charlie felt Wilbur was in a role far below what he had been doing and only doing the job for the money. Therefore, Charlie felt that Wilbur could have done the job earlier in his career but where he was currently at personally, he just was not interested.

### **5.1.3** Communication

One of the key issues raised by the participants was that of communication. This is not particularly surprising as it is raised in the majority of all leadership books and theories (see Bass, 1990 for example) and as McKenna et al. suggest ‘Communication skill is central to wisdom’ (p. 180). For Dale, ‘Communication is critical and if you’re not talking to your people productively and proactively you’re dead in the water.’

There are a few factors that the wise leaders had in common in regards to communication. Wise leaders are considered to be people with a broad knowledge, a depth of experience, and a breadth of learning. However, for wise leaders it would seem that it is not just what they know, it is the way they apply it. Furthermore, it is also not just how they apply it but the way they say what they know including articulation and manner. Based on the participant’s comments, it is not enough to simply be wise, wisdom must be shared. The

wise leader must provide the opportunity to listen and be willing to share from his or her own knowledge and experience.

Participants talked about their wise leader's willingness to share their experiences and to provide learning opportunities. Charlie described Wilbur as being generous with imparting his knowledge. This is not meant to imply that all wise leaders were described as extroverts; however, the majority were described with such terms as communicative, full of advice and prepared to take the time to explain matters to ensure that the participant understood. And, as Penny summarised, 'what's the purpose of that knowledge if they don't share it?'

Many wise leaders were described as being articulate. The ability to communicate was not simply between leader and follower, but also throughout the organisation and with external parties. This ability does not only appear to include the ability to be articulate but also the ability to relate to the participant on a personal level, providing clear information in a way they could individually understand. Penny describes Wheeler as 'having a wonderful way of explaining things.'

This ability to articulate well also seems to require that the wise leaders communicate in a way that allows for the followers maintaining their dignity. Participants provided examples of how their wise leaders would provide advice or remind them of guidelines that could be regarded as quite sensitive and potentially received in a negative manner. However, the participants felt that the wise leaders did not cause offence but throughout the process participants felt safe in the knowledge that their integrity was not being undermined. One common tactic seemed to have been that the wise leaders would discuss matters privately, choosing not to address issues in front of the team. Pamela described Wheeler as being able to explain things to her without leaving her feeling 'like an idiot'.

The content of what wise leaders communicate goes beyond the transactional requirements of a manager (Bass, 1990) and also includes other areas such as career advice and personal advice. As Mindy described Wanda, '[she] had the ability to provide advice on a range of different things as in career, life and everything in between'. Participants also described their wise leaders as providing explanation in regards to how their work fits in with the wider picture of the organisation.

There were also descriptions of how wise leaders took the time to discuss matters of business that were far beyond the participant's requirements for the immediate role and a few were entrusted with information that was perceived as being more confidential than what their role would normally be privy to. For example Rodger said 'that at a young age, 5-6 years into my working life, I was being privy to sensitive and confidential information through the confidence and faith [Walter] had in me at that time and that went as far as being privy to salary information of the most senior executives of the very large organization I was working for at the time. He trusted me implicitly.'

Wise leaders were described as managers who challenged the participants. This was expressed in a number of ways. Opportunities for growth, both personally and professionally, were actively facilitated by the wise leaders. Wise leaders were often able to see potential in the participants that others had not or that may not be obvious and based on such insights they would entrust the participants with greater responsibilities. They would often provide freedom within their roles and while for some participants this was a new experience, they all seemed to have appreciated it even though it required more input from the participants than they had experienced. For example, Penny said that Waldo pushed the way she thought about herself and while that was initially uncomfortable it led her to be more honest with herself and to think differently about situations she was facing. Penny's previous manager had been quite directive and would check through the detailed

aspects of what Penny was doing. Waldo, on the other hand, said that he wasn't interested in the detail and preferred to engage her on strategic matters leaving Penny to manage the functional aspects of her role. 'The objective,' as described by Charlie in regards to what wise leaders do, 'is to enable, to engage, [and] to empower by having people want to do things'.

A number of the participants commented on how their wise leaders provided 'constructive feedback' and 'challenging work environments'. Participants described situations where their wise leader would address matters that provided learning opportunities by highlighting areas where the participant needed to improve. They described conversations where the subject matter may be confronting and offensive if not presented well. An example of this was when Pamela was describing how Wendy would approach a potentially difficult situation:

she would just sit there and wait, she would give you that opportunity. So you held responsibility for your own work as well, you felt responsible rather than her. If she felt she should step in because you weren't doing what was expected she would manage you as such. She would never ever do anything in front of the team if she took you in to her office, she would never talk to you about anything in front of someone else.

So why is it that participants say they did not 'take offence' when spoken to by the wise leaders about potentially sensitive issues?

Based on other observations made, there could be at least two possible answers to the question of not causing offence. One is that the wise leaders have the interpersonal skills to be able to relate to their followers without impairing their relationship. There is an underlying theme with many of the descriptions of the wise leaders that they are 'empathetic' and able to relate to many different types of people as seen with Mindy's comments regarding Wanda 'she was just all heart, like really empathetic towards people, she had a wonderful way of explaining things to people, had a wonderful way of pitching

herself at the appropriate level to different people which made her really, really good at her job and not just being really smart'. Being sensitive to the feelings of their followers may ensure that they anticipate the needs of the follower and adapt their leadership style to suit (Liden & Graen, 1980, and Schyns et al., 2007). Therefore it may be related to the concept of wise leadership and emotional intelligence which will be discussed in the next section.

It may also be that because a relationship has been established between the wise leader and the follower that within the context of the relationship, issues such as areas that require personal development may be accepted more easily. If a leader tries to bring up a similar issue, but outside the context of relationship, the message may be received quite differently by the follower. The contextual issue of the relationship between the wise leader and follower will be further discussed later.

In contrast, the descriptions of the unwise leaders suggest that when sensitive issues were raised they were not well received. Pamela talked about how she was ridiculed by one manager in front of her colleagues while another misrepresented the issues the team had raised to senior management. Even conversations that should have been fairly innocuous were not well received. Mindy tells this story about one of her unwise leaders:

[Y]ou could tell he had read management 101 and had gone to a course one day which said to make sure you come in the morning and ask your staff and ask them how their day is and he would awkwardly come out of his office at kind of 1.15pm most days and awkwardly lean over the partition and go "Hi, so...how's it going" and you'd be like "good...aaaah...really busy, what do you want?" just an awkward personality at the best of times, doing it to tick the box so obviously doing it to tick the box that your skin crawled, not a bad person, a nice person, a family man, but just not a people person and just couldn't connect with people because he didn't really have an interest in people but very smart but not what I call wise because not able to share it, but just so awkward, it was really hard to get past the awkwardness.

Mindy describes how this manager was technically capable but came across as not being comfortable with staff related matters which resulted in difficulties around communication.

The concept that the wise leaders were challenging would appear to be in contradiction to the other factors raised, such as caring, although none of the participants seemed uncomfortable with the apparent incongruity of concepts. In fact, a number of participants commented on how they felt their wise leaders created 'good' and 'strong' teams.' Challenging behaviour would seem to have created an attitude of responsibility within the teams the wise leaders were in charge of. Building a strong team leads into the next idea, that of the role of team leader.

#### **5.1.4 Team leader**

There would seem to be a theme that wise leaders are able to create effective which in turn impacts on team performance. Creation of effective teams may also be linked to issues of trust as has been discussed. 'To the extent that the leader encourages a team climate characterized by psychological safety it is argued that they will be seen more benevolent and potentially as having more ability in that they are consultative and not threatened by suggestions from team members' (Burke et al., 2007, p. 622).

Wise leaders have been described as 'not needing to know everything' and Mindy also said that Wanda would often get her input on areas. Dale found that William was happy to say he was not strong in a particular area and that Dale was so he was happy to acquiesce to the Dale's suggestions. Current research into the area of 'collective leadership' suggests that leadership is spread around the team depending on areas of expertise. Rather than for one leader to be in charge of everything, the responsibility is spread (Friedrich, Vessey, Schuelke, Ruark and Mumford, 2009). If part of wise leadership is to believe that the leader does not hold all the knowledge and power but is prepared to allow members of the team to function without unnecessary surveillance, as it would seem that it is, then this should result in more positive attitudes and productivity for teams.



### 5.1.5 Followership

There has been some criticism that researchers in their attempts to better understand leadership tend to focus primarily on leadership itself with little emphasis on followership (Collinson, 2006). This research project, rather inadvertently, has a significant focus on followership because of the decision to interview followers rather than leaders. While most of the participants are also leaders, their observations are delivered (or derived) from a follower's perspective.

A number of the participants describe their wise leaders as one of their first managers. For example the first wise leader Cathy had was Willard who been her employer during her high school and university years and the second wise leader was Wilson who had been her employer when she left university. She also describes her pleasure in 'finding' another wise leader in her current job, which would seem to suggest she is actively looking for people who will provide her with wise leadership. If Cathy is looking for wise leadership it may suggest that there is an element of readiness in the follower.

This can also be seen in situations where followers do not appear to be open to a wise leader-follower relationship. Penny felt that Waldo was not considered wise by the team because she thought 'some of them were very mature people who maybe weren't quite so open to the wisdom of others'. This suggests that there may be stages in which followers are not as open to be lead by a wise leader. Pamela said that she had not found any wise leaders where she is currently working because she says that she has not had time yet to 'feel safe'. So it would seem that there almost needs to be openness in the followers to receive wisdom from others. When there is that openness perhaps it is more likely you will find wise leaders?

If the follower is not open to the potential of being lead by a wise leader it would seem they may resist or even reject the opportunity. Pamela suggested that she feels she has not looked for a wise leader in her new role because she needs to know if she is in a safe environment. Penny talks about how for most of the time she was reporting to Waldo she did not even realise the manager was wise. In fact she at times questioned his sanity. She even went so far as expressing her frustration to the Human Resources director. His response was to suggest the wise leader might know what he was doing. If not for the manager's advice, Penny may have left the role prematurely and potentially missed out on the opportunity to appreciate the benefits of working with Waldo.

These two examples indicate that the followers' expectancy can impact the wise leader-follower relationship. Pamela's description suggests that because she is not looking for a wise leader she is unlikely to engage in such a relationship. Penny's experience with Waldo suggests that if a follower does not recognise the potential in their leader they may also choose not to engage in a wise leader-follower relationship.

#### **5.1.6 The wise leader-follower relationship**

As a result of interviewing followers in order to understand more about leadership wisdom I seem to be drawn to the role of the follower and to the relationship between the leader and the follower. It would seem that it is in the relationship that wise leadership exists. I have termed this as the wise leader-follower relationship. 'The fundamental task of leaders, we argue, is to prime good feeling in those they lead. At its root, then, the primal job of leadership is emotional' (Goleman et al., 2002, p. ix). For it has also been said that 'effective leadership involves an emotional bond with followers in addition to a contractual bond' (Berson et al., 2006, p. 179). As followers and leaders are 'inextricably linked, mutually reinforcing and shifting within specific contexts' (Collinson, 2006) rather than

focusing solely on leadership or followership when addressing the issue of wise leadership it would seem necessary to look at the relationship between the two.

Based on the themes that have become evident regarding the concept of relationship throughout the interviews, it would seem that leadership wisdom may be realised in the relationship between leader and follower. This is very similar to Grint's (2000) suggestion that leadership exists in the relationship between the leader and the follower. And as also been suggested,

the relationship between the leader and the follower is a unique type of close, interpersonal relationship within the organizational context. Both parties rely on one another for information, resources, and services geared to achieving a common goal and in this sense, the leader-follower relationship is one of interdependence' (Campbell et al., 2008, p. 558).

If leadership exists in the relationship, then we might be able to assume that as leadership wisdom is a function of leadership, it too will exist within the relationship.

It is in the relationship built on trust and respect that opportunities to provide advice can be received in a positive way. The responsibility for such a relationship can not solely be on the shoulders of the leaders. The leader can provide the opportunity for providing wisdom but it is dependent on the follower to receive it before it can be deemed to be wise leadership. This dynamic will be referred to as the wise leader-follower relationship.

There are only two participants who described a wise leader who was also their current manager. Cathy explained how she has really enjoyed discovering that Whitney was worth listening to because she found that she did not value her previous two managers. She finds Whitney to be articulate and easy to talk to and goes to Whitney to discuss strategic issues and for coaching on specific management issues. The example she provided was in regard to the non-performance of a couple of staff members. Cathy went to Whitney, discussed the issue, and Whitney provided her with an exemplar dialogue. Cathy made use of key

words and phrases that Whitney provided and felt that '[w]ithout that type of mentoring...I wouldn't have had the resignation[s] as early as I had.'

The second participant to describe a current manager as a wise leader, Fiona, went into detail describing how good her current manager, Wade, is at providing support when she has a problem. She appreciates his ability to understand the pressures she faces and can really provide solutions because he understands the business they are in. She also appreciates that he represents the team to senior management and speaks up on their behalf when necessary.

In both of these examples the attributes that the two participants appreciate in their wise leaders, who are also their current managers, are quite immediate and focused on business activities. For example neither of them said if their wise leaders provided them with career advice. This might suggest that the relationship the participants have with wise leaders who are their managers might be different from those who have longer term relationships that have continued on after their tenure has ended.

In regards to communication, Penny remarked that it is not what they do 'it's the way they do it'. She was trying to explain her experience with wise leaders in regard to how each were able to advise her and guide her, even when she did not fully understand or agree, in a way in which she felt comfortable. This may imply that the wise leaders provide information in a way that is sensitive to the individual's style and personal needs. It is in this interaction that an environment can be created that is conducive to a wise leader-follower relationship.

The one instance of a wise leader being someone who is a public figure or 'celebrity' is only briefly touched on. This may be, as conceded by Dale, because he had only had the

opportunity to observe this wise leader via the media and had not had the opportunity to know her personally and therefore develop a relationship. As an aside, since interviewing Dale the wise leader mentioned has undergone significant public criticism and has been shown in the media in quite a negative light. It would be interesting to ask Dale if he still holds the same opinion of the wise leader.

Many of the wise leaders were seen to be wise in the participant's opinion but they were not sure that this would be a universally held opinion. Cathy thought that Wilson was a bit 'too rough or tough to other people'. And Charlie thought Wilbur, who was described as being a life long friend and someone he was very fond of, was also a 'cranky old bastard'. This personality trait did not concern Charlie at all but he thought it may not be as well received by others.

While there has been criticism regarding the fundamental assumptions with trait theories of leadership (see Block, 1995 for example) others, such as Judge, Piccolo & Kosalko (2009), have reassessed the leader trait paradigm and suggest there may be value. They have concluded that both dark and bright characteristics have potential for positive and negative consequences depending on the context. The bright side characteristics are said to be: conscientiousness; extraversion; agreeableness; emotional stability; openness to experience; core self-evaluations; intelligence; and charisma. While the dark side characteristics are said to be: narcissism; hubris; dominance; and Machiavellianism. Aspects of both sets of characteristics have been observed in this research from both the wise leader and unwise leader descriptions.

Schyns et al. (2007) suggest that the impact of the followers own characteristics regarding their perception of their leader is significant. Context has an influence on perception of a leader's characteristics. In different contexts both traits that considered to be dark side

traits or bright side traits can have both positive and negative consequences (Judge et al., 2009). Also, some participants thought that their wise leader may have been perceived differently in different situations. Dale described William as having strategic skills that did not suit the current economic climate or strategic phase of the company.

Many leader-follower relationships have often grown to ones described as ‘lasting friendships’ enduring beyond the participant’s or wise leader’s tenure and often moving beyond the organisational boundaries into personal lives. Cathy describes going out to meals with Willard and Wilson’s families, Charlie continues to make regular visits to Wilbur’s farm 25 years after working together, and Mindy has Wanda coming to her wedding. One of the benefits in developing a friendship is that when there is a friendship between the follower and the leader both parties are more likely to attribute positive results to internal factors and negative results to external factors (Boyd & Taylor, 1998).

Therefore it is more likely the follower will form and maintain a positive impression of the leader when a friendship has developed.

As followers base their perception of leaders on their own expectations (Berson et al., 2006) the development of a wise leader-follower relationship would seem to be not solely based on the leader’s ability or lack of ability. It has long been recognised that expectations of followers impact their perception of leaders (Hill, 1973). There are some individuals, for example, who have a propensity to trust (Burke et al., 2007), as it likely that trust has a positive impact on the wise leader-follower relationship, this propensity may increase the likelihood of the follower more positively perceiving their leader. Followers’ attitudes towards leaders can also impact on the leader’s effectiveness. The level of trust and value congruence in followers has been shown to be significant (Jung, et al., 2009).

## Discussion

The research conducted by Jung et al. (2009) also found significant differences in the impact of follower attitudes on transformational leadership when measuring followers from two different cultures as in collectivist versus individualistic cultures. Followers' attitudes from collective cultures were found to have less of an impact on the level of leadership effectiveness. As the participants of this research all come from an individualistic culture, it may be that the themes identified in relation to wise leadership may not be universally applicable. This will be discussed in the 'Limitations and Opportunities for Further Research' section.

Research in the area of other leadership styles such as ideological leadership has found that some followers may not scrutinise their leaders as they usually would (Mumford, Antes, Caughron & Friedrich, 2008). So while it may be that strong relationships, even friendships, between the leader and the followers can be more conducive to the formation of wise leader-follower relationship, it may also suggest that the observations made by the participants may have been influenced by other factors. Further research exploring wise leaders' teams, as will be discussed in the 'Limitations and Opportunities for Further Research' section, may help limit this potentially confounding variable and improve the potential to better understand the concept of wise leadership.

Not only do followers have an impact on the wise leader-follower relationship but also the environment can have a positive or negative influence. This can be seen when Dale described his unwise leader as being 'a bully'. Dale felt that the unwise leader was motivated by his bonus system, a system that the organisation had set up and was, in essence, rewarding the unwise leader for his management style. Organisational climate has an influence on the level of trust individuals feel (Burke et al., 2007). As it seems that trust is a factor in the wise leader-follower relationship then if the followers do not feel

they are in a safe environment they may be less likely to be open to forming a wise leader-follower relationship.

While talking with the participants, it seemed that when they were describing their chosen leaders who they felt were wise, they were also describing their favourite leaders. Could this mean then that I have simply been discussing the popular leader? Could I have just as easily asked: 'Please describe your favourite leader?' Or it could it be that the leaders that are most greatly valued are not those who are the cleverest, most successful, the friendliest or the most caring but they are the ones who practice wise leadership. Therefore, there may be a correlation between leader's who are regarded as wise and follower's favourite leaders.

One reason for there to be an appearance that there is a correlation between the wise leaders and the impression that they are the participant's favourite leader could be that followers like to be led by certain types of leaders. Fiona felt that the way Wade lead her in regards to his straight forward style is the way she feels most suits her. Dale commented that while William was not always regarded as wise, he felt that William was the 'kind of person I work best under.'

This, however, does not fit with all the wise leader's descriptions. Penny was so concerned over Waldo's behaviour that she raised it with the Human Resources director. It was only at the end of Waldo's tenure that she recognised the positive impact he had been having on her. While she had felt somewhat 'overwhelmed' by his more 'open handed' approach, a less controlling style that she was used to, she later realised it had provided the opportunity to develop her own leadership skills. When she returned to a more controlled environment she found the experience less enjoyable. So at the time Waldo would not



have been described as either her favourite leader or as a wise leader. It is in retrospect that she has come to consider him wise.

The two concepts of participants developing close bonds with their wise leader and participants describing their wise leaders as their favourite leaders would seem to align somewhat with the leadership-member exchange model (LMX). The LMX model suggests that leaders develop different types of relationships with group members (Liden & Graen, 1980). As leaders relate to different members of their teams differently, resulting in stronger or weaker relationships resulting in the formation of in-groups and out-groups.

Further to this Boyd & Taylor suggest 'that the highest quality work experience for both leader and follower potentially occurs when both a close leader-follower friendship and a high LMX are present' (1998, p. 4). This is confirmed in the formation of friendships seen in a number of the interviews. It may be that as the wise leader-follower relationship is characterised by both friendship and high LMX these relationships become significant to the follower.

Some participants also described how they felt that they are similar to their wise leaders in personality. Cathy said when describing Whitney 'I think we are probably a similar type profile in that we are quite extroverted, assertive, and leaders[in our own right] and we talk really quickly and we can bounce things off each other really quickly'. Being similar can enhance the likelihood of friendship and therefore increase the chance of forming a stronger relationship (Boyd & Taylor, 1998).

It would seem that it is not just how the leader behaves that has an impact on the strength of the LMX. Recently, there have been studies from the perspective of follower perception and how that also may influence the strength of the LMX (Schyns et al., 2007). They even

suggest that ‘the perceived quality of the relationship is not only related to the actual quality of the relationship, but also to followers’ expectancies and preferences’ (Schyns et al., 2007, p. 772).

Leaders often have followers who are more favoured than others (Schyns et al., 2007).

This can lead to the leader encouraging greater participation and placing greater significance in what the favoured followers have to contribute (Burns, Rodgers, Mannix, Hendron & Oldroyd, 2009). This, in turn, may have an influence on the participants’ perceptions as a number of them talked about how they felt they were listened to and that their input was valued by the wise leader. So while it may seem that the participants have been discussing their favourite leaders, it may also be that they were in turn favoured by their leader. This may also explain why a number of participants said that their wise leader would not have been considered wise by other members of their organisation.

Furthermore, a number of wise leaders have been described as being able to delegate well and able to fully utilise the people they have around them. They are also described as trusting their staff. So, if they are doing this effectively, again, they are more likely to have the time to think things through strategically, to be able to take time for their staff, to be able to have time to explain the things that are not just about the immediate issue, have time to think through the consequences of decisions, have added capacity to seemingly know everything because they have determined what is important, and had the time to keep up with vital elements. In contrast the unwise leaders were described as being very hands on and controlling and directive, or ‘micromanaging’.

While there were some participants who were able to provide a number of examples of wise leaders, I also found that even for those who only described one wise leader it seemed that close bonds were often formed between the participants and their wise leader. For

example Charlie talks about the shift manager, Wilbur, of his first job after graduating. While he described Wilbur as the ‘cranky old bastard’ it was made evident throughout the interview that Charlie held the man in high regard. He still has a relationship with him and still draws on the Wilbur’s counsel provided for him over 25 years later. Mindy shared how she not only learnt a lot from Wanda but she also really admires her. They have continued their relationship beyond the time working together and Mindy has invited the Wanda to her wedding. Pamela also describes Wendy as not only her boss but also her friend. Not only did Pamela choose to follow Wendy to a new role, even after they have both moved on from those roles and the organisation they have also continued to regularly socialise.

In summation of the wise leader-follower relationship, as I have argued that wise leaders need to not only have the ability to be wise, they also have to actively be doing such things as sharing their wisdom. In addition it seems that followers need to have an active role in the relationship. While the environment has an influence on leaders (Mumford et al., 2008), leaders are also having an influence on that environment (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). So, by being an active participant in the development of wise leader-follower relationships, both the leader and the follower may be able to improve the potential to form such relationships and also both may have an impact on the depth of the relationship.

This may imply that unwise leaders could be perceived as wise leaders in different situations. Penny, for example, did change her opinion dramatically regarding Waldo. She went from questioning leadership to valuing it. In this example, the leader’s behaviour did not change it was the perception of the follower that changed.

## 5.2 Impact

Blake is one of the participants who was not able to provide as much depth in his descriptions of Walcott and Wyatt or of how they may have had an impact. This may be because, as he lamented, he only had the opportunity to work a few months with his wise leaders and did not develop a long term relationship with either.

Reading over one of the interviews (which was actually the second interview I conducted) I asked a question of Rodger that, in retrospect, I should have asked all of the participants. This question asked how he thought the unwise leader had impacted the organisation. His response was 'I don't think it was a destructive or negative impact but what it is a stalling effect, nothing much happens really, there is a lot of leaders and characters in this space, there is an enormous amount of time and effort invested in a little.' I think that if I had have asked all the participants this question I may have got some added insight into unwise leaders and then potentially wise leadership.

Throughout the discussions regarding the impact that the wise leaders had on the participants I was surprised at how often the participants thought that the wise leaders did not have that much impact on the organisation. There were some examples of the wise leader impacting both the follower and the organization such as Wanda who was described as creating a warm team environment to work in and who 'made a very successful agency as a result.' Other examples, however, describe the wise leaders as having little impact on the wider organisation even described as not being recognised for providing any value. Dale felt that others 'wouldn't have got as much out of him [William] as much as I did' and that William was 'undervalued in the organisation.'

So, while all the wise leaders have made a positive impact on the participants in some way, not all made an impact on their organisation. From that I may assume that the two aspects are not interdependent as in wise leaders can impact an individual without impacting the organisation.

In addition, there were no examples of wise leaders having a positive impact on the organization while not having a positive impact on the participant. So for a participant to describe someone as a wise leader they had to have had at least a positive impact on the participant. Implications as to what this may suggest will be discussed in the 'Limitations and Opportunities for Further Research' section below.

If wise leaders do not always have a positive impact on an organisation, should it be something that organisations need to encourage? With this particular thesis, I have only looked at the topic from one perspective that of leadership wisdom from a follower's point of view. Therefore, from a follower's perspective it is conceivable that their primary concern would be how the wise leader affects them personally. So there may be other factors of wise leadership that impact the wider organisation. Intuitively, even if there is little direct input to the organisation, any positive impact on the followers would have a positive flow-on effect to the organisation. Participants described feelings of enjoyment at work and being challenged to work more productively than they would have otherwise when working for their wise leaders. They also describe there being strong team environments which would also potentially lead to a positive impact on the organisation. Many studies have shown how positive team environments can improve performance (e.g. Chen, Kirkman, Kanfer, Allen & Rosen, 2007) and influence the creativity of staff (Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta & Kramer, 2004).

### **5.3 What a wise leader is not**

As noted earlier, I had approached this topic expecting that I would hear stories of heroic leaders making significant and difficult choices that only revealed their profoundness after the situation. However, while the wise leaders that were described by the participants included some very dynamic and exemplary leaders, there were no dramatic stories told and any superstar status would seem to be only in the perspective of the participants.

The issue that there is significant cross-over in the descriptions of wise leaders and unwise leaders may be, in part, due to context. As discussed earlier, Judge et al. (2009) suggest that there can be both positive and negative outcomes resulting from both dark and bright leadership characteristics. If the contexts of the organisational environment include follower expectation and attitude as well as depth of relationship then these all may contribute to the potential of wise leader-follower relationships.

Some participants described their unwise leaders as being self-focussed and that while their leadership maybe effective in the short term, the participants did not feel that the unwise leader's style would be suitable over a longer time period. This observation has also been made by those studying narcissism in leadership. Narcissistic leadership maybe effective in the short term or in situations such as new roles or in unstable organisations. However, it does not appear to be suitable in long term situations (Judge et al., 2009). Researchers have also found that this type of leadership is more likely to hurt the follower than the leader him or herself (Campbell & Campbell, 2009) which is also seen in Dale's descriptions of how his unwise leader was receiving financial bonuses while his followers were suffering with high absentee rates and a high staff turnover.

## Discussion

When the participants were asked to describe an unwise leader the picture they created was not the opposite of the descriptions they had given of wise leaders. Descriptions of unwise leaders regarding knowledge, ability and experience were very mixed. Some unwise leaders were described as 'pretty switched on' and 'very competent commercially'. Others described unwise leaders as someone who is not qualified or capable in either their technical ability or leadership ability with Charlie summarising an unwise leader as '[n]ot able to deliver a result as predicted.'

Unlike wise leaders who were often described as having earned their position it was suggested that some unwise leaders had been 'promoted into roles ahead of time' or as Rodger suggested of his two unwise leaders 'they both achieved senior positions when there were real question marks around track record and ability to deliver on the goods'.

For most of the positive comments regarding the unwise leader's skills and knowledge there was often a disclaimer. For example Pamela said that 'while this guy was pretty switched on and was pretty smart [it] was totally obliterated by his whole attitude towards people'.

Some of the descriptions of unwise leaders seem to have similarity to the type of leaders Einarsen, Aasland & Skogstad (2007) describe as destructive leaders. These leaders use tactics such as humiliation, belittling and manipulations to fulfil their tasks. Dale described his unwise leader as a bully while Pamela said her unwise leader would make fun of her openly in front of peers. Interestingly, Rodger's description of Wickham included similar language 'I had to constantly balance between these destructive aspects verses the positive aspects and always the pendulum for me was always squarely in the thought that as a leader he was incredibly effective'. This again suggests that wise

leadership and unwise leadership are not opposite constructs and unwise leaders demonstrate areas of effectiveness.

While wise leaders were described as being comfortable with not having to know everything, unwise leaders were not. Fiona said that she felt that unwise leaders ‘either thought they knew everything or thought that they needed to know everything.’ Trying to have all the knowledge and control may create dissent (Collinson, 2005) and this may negatively impact on the leader-follower relationship which in-turn may reduce the potential for a wise leader-follower relationship.

Unwise leaders are also described as being self centred with Rodger saying that he believed that his unwise leader had ‘100% self-directed motivations’. This concept is in direct contrast to what was described as altruistic behaviour displayed by the wise leaders.

#### **5.4 Leadership Wisdom: An emerging picture of leader-follower relationship**

Based on the themes that have been identified, a picture of the wise leader-follower relationship has begun to emerge. The following table provides a summary of those themes.

<b>Environment</b>	<b>Leader</b>	<b>Follower</b>
Safety: with bullying unacceptable	Knowledge & Experience	Expectancy
Reward system that supports behaviour	Effective communication skills	Openness to opportunity
	Willingness to participate in relationship	Trust
	Ethical	Respect
	Emotional intelligence	Friendship
	Friendship	

**Table 2 Wise Leader-Follower Relationship**



## 5.5 Comments regarding the learning process

Throughout the interview and analysis process I made a number of changes and found that I could look at the findings in a number of different ways which is common to qualitative research (Maylor & Blackmon, 2005). However what I also discovered that the interviewing process also had an impact on the participants in that they went through a process of learning and even discovering things about themselves. This is evident with Jeremy who had not realised that the very things that he had been advised to work on during a leadership training course were the attributes he most admired in Wilbur. Rodger realised while he was describing Walter that he actually felt that wise leaders have an ability to know when and how much to trust their followers.

Penny developed her own personal understanding of what she considered as wise leadership throughout the process of the interview. Initially she said she could think of two people she would regard as wise leaders and as the interview progressed she was also able to think of two more who she would regard as wise. She even selected another potential candidate and then rejected him because of certain aspects of his style that she believed discounted him from being classified as a wise leader. After some thought Penny reflected that 'to me a wise person is all rounded but there's some aspects of [this manager] that I don't give [him] that category'.

There may also be other factors that impact on wisdom and therefore leadership. These include the role of the follower and the role of the environment. While this research has identified that the role of the follower would seem to have significant impact, the role of environment has only been obliquely touched on and as it may also be important for leadership wisdom. While environment was not often mentioned by the participants Dale,

## Discussion

who when describing his unwise leader being a bully, made reference to the organisation supporting the behaviour through bonus schemes.

## **6 Limitations and Opportunities for Further Research**

As there are only limited identifiers in this introductory investigation and the participant pool has been limited to one organisation, the potential applicability to other groups is limited so therefore it is not appropriate to make assumptions to other groups. While I did try to ensure some variety as in the participants were selected from different departments and sites within the organisation, still it was only one organisation within one industry. The factors that have been identified may not be relevant with other industries, disciplines, organisations, or cultures.

An example of this is in the area of the impact of followers. Research into the area of how the attitude of follower's impacts the potential for leadership effectiveness has shown there to be differences between results from collectivist and individualistic cultures (Jung et al., 2009). Therefore, any conclusions found in this research may not be found in other cultural settings as all the participants have come from an individualistic culture. Further research from differing perspectives, therefore, may add value to gain greater understanding of wise leadership.

Due to the open style of interviewing, I have had to make numerous judgement calls on what responses fit what topics which is consistent with grounded theory approach (Klenke, 2008). At every decision there is the risk that I have not judged appropriately and have let my own pre-conceived opinions impact on how the responses were categorized. To reduce the impact of this I have included direct quotes and maintained an iterative approach to the research.

One of the key limitations of this research is that I only talked to people about their experiences with wise leaders. I did not talk to the wise leaders themselves. However, it

## Limitations and opportunities for further research

could be argued that before I could talk to wise leaders I first needed to define if there was such a thing as wise leadership and if so what a wise leader would look like. Once better understood it would increase the likelihood of being able to identify a wise leader in order to interview him or her. So, further research that includes interviewing wise leaders may provide significant insight.

I had thought that if I asked the participants what an unwise leader was that would be asking for the opposite of wise leadership. This is an example of an assumption about binary polarities being disconfirmed in the interviews. However, while I may have approached the question in the wrong way the intent of the question was able to elicit interesting information. That is, while I had prompted the participants to provide 'the antithesis of a wise leader' what developed was a picture of people leading in ways that lacked wisdom as opposed to complete opposites of the wise leaders.

Even though the subject of unwise leadership was only briefly touched on the responses that were given provided interesting feedback. More investigation into this area may provide added insight into wise leadership. The subject of unwise leaders also highlights my limitations as a researcher in that I think there were opportunities missed. One of the more obvious issues is found in the fact that I only asked Rodger what impact he thought unwise leaders had on organisations. It might be useful to ask followers what impact unwise leaders have on organisations and individuals. I did not spend much time on unwise leaders so opportunities for further research would help to better understand wise leadership and also to potentially find out if there are unique insights into the benefits and draw backs of unwise leaders and how unwise leaders may develop wisdom. It has been suggested that 'understanding and preventing destructive leadership may be as important, or even more important, than understanding and enhancing positive aspects of leadership' (Einarsen, et al., 2007, p. 208).

## Limitations and opportunities for further research

The people that the participants selected as wise leaders may not necessarily be the only examples of wise leaders they have observed. For example, Charlie said that ‘There are many leaders who I’ve met who I would consider wise but he’s the one that stood out.’ I did not ask every participant if they had other examples and they may have come up with more if pushed further or if given more time to think about the concept. The interviews were limited to one hour as per the agreement made with the organisation they were from. Keeping it limited to one hour would seem to have provided limitations like this one.

When asked if he knew of any wise leaders Jeremy answered ‘I had planned to think this through a bit more before hand but I think the answer is yes’. Providing more information before the interviews may have helped the participants to think through this relatively new topic. However, it may also have influenced the participants as to how they were going to define what they thought of leadership wisdom.

As it has been implied that not all wise leaders are valued within an organisation, further research may be of value into how the environment impacts wise leader-follower relationships. More specifically, McKenna et al. (2009) suggest that further research into how environments can enhance wise leadership would be beneficial. As discussed, this research is limited by the fact that it is based on the perceptions of followers. Could it be possible that some wise leaders may have roles where their wise actions do not impact the individual but have broader implications that could still be regarded as wise?

This study has only looked at the potential construct of leadership wisdom from a follower’s perspective. There are a number of other perspectives that could provide interesting insights into this construct. As mentioned a deeper understanding of unwise leadership may prove valuable. Also, I noticed that during the interview process I wanted to find out more about the wise leaders that were discussed. I wanted to hear directly from the wise leader to understand the issues from their perspective and maybe learn more about

their motivations, the outcomes they were hoping to achieve and what factors helped or hindered them achieving those outcomes.

I also would have liked to talk with other people who reported to the wise leader to gain a more in-depth picture of the person and maybe a clearer understanding of the relational aspects of the wise leader-follower relationship. If, as it seems based on what these initial insights have suggested, that leadership wisdom is realised within the leader-follower relationship then a multi-perspective study that gets feedback from more than one source may prove beneficial. As it is not clear if all members of a wise leader's team will have the same opinion of the leader then it may be necessary to identify the wise leader then interview the whole team who report to them.

Another perspective that could be interesting would be from someone who the wise leader reports to their direct manager or representatives of the Board of Directors. When the participants were choosing who they thought were wise leaders they, almost unanimously, chose managers they reported to. So, as with other members of the wise leaders' team, once the wise leader has been identified it may be beneficial to also gain their manager's perspective of the wise leader.

It may also be of value to interview the follower, the wise leader, and others within their team to gain more insight into the nature of the relationship. Often the participants' described friendships with their wise leaders. Friendships with followers can make for quite a different dynamic in the leader-follower relationship that can lead to more positive outcomes than for those who have not formed a friendship (Burns et al., 2009). If there is an element of friendship influencing the wise leader-follower relationship then its impact may be worth investigating for its implications both in this relationship and the team as a whole.

## 7 Conclusions

The process of conducting this research has led me through a journey of discovery not only about leadership wisdom but also about researching itself. I have found it to be a series of constantly balancing one need with another. Knowledge about the subject is needed to provide a base from which ideas can develop but knowledge can also create a veil of assumptions that can cloud what is really happening; being open-minded enough to see the unexpected while at the same time exercising discretion in order to not get distracted from the goal; listening carefully enough to hear subtleties that need further exploration while not getting too entrenched in the detail that the bigger picture is lost, are just some of the issues I faced.

I am pleased with the choice of qualitative research over quantitative as the participants provided far greater insight into the area studied than I had anticipated. While I have interviewed many people within a business context which I think helped with certain skills such as being confident enough to allow for pauses, I found interviewing for research purposes different in a number of ways. Firstly, I found the participants were willing to be very open and shared some quite personal stories. This may be because as a researcher I was seen as a non-judgemental observer who provided no threat to their work life. Secondly, I was surprised (but pleased) at the level of enthusiasm of the participants to be involved. Not only did they take time out of their work schedules to participate but they also took the process seriously and seemed concerned about ensuring they were providing a clear picture of what they were explaining. This was surprising for me as there were no obvious benefits for the participants. This is in contrast to interviews such as job interviews or performance appraisals where there is potential for significant benefit.

## Conclusion

While a significant reason for this research was to complete the requirements for a Master in Management and to learn about how to conduct a research project, my approach was to endeavour to understand more about leadership wisdom. I chose this topic because it seemed interesting and because I believe that understanding this concept may be useful. By studying leadership wisdom as a unique construct by interviewing followers, it was possible to gain further understanding of how it is enacted in an organisational setting.

The pursuit of understanding leadership wisdom has not led to finding the perfect boss. On the contrary, the pursuit of leadership wisdom has led to the discovery of leaders who may not climb to the top of the business, who display a variety of weaknesses and who may not even be regarded as wise by all they meet. However, what they have done is connect with the people who have worked with them beyond transactional relationship; beyond what would be enough to simply get the job done. They are prepared to invest their time and insights, and they are prepared to engage their followers in a journey of development.

Wise leaders are described as encouraging; they developed relationships with their followers and see potential in them that others, maybe not even they themselves had realized. These leaders left an indelible impression on them and provided models that their followers wish to emulate. These leaders are not perfect people, they are not necessarily superstars in business, and they may not even be deemed to be wise by everyone else. However, they are all caring and all took time to do more than simply get the job done. They have the ability to look up and out and see potential, distil the complex into the achievable by identifying key issues and are not distracted with detail. Many were challenged by these leaders and encouraged to see how issues like dealing with their staff can be viewed in different ways and to respond differently as a result.



## Conclusion

Leadership wisdom can be found in a wide variety of leaders, in a wide variety of styles, in relationships that can be from several months to decades long; from solely a work relationship to life long friendships. Yet there is something about these leaders that so deeply impact the individual that they are remembered as the leader who had a profound influence on their life and career.

## 8 Appendices

### 8.1 Appendix i: Ethics Committee approval



**Massey University**

23 October 2009

Sharon Rowland  
1 Lorikeet Lane  
Waterways  
Victoria 3195  
AUSTRALIA

Dear Sharon

**Re: Leadership Wisdom: Interviews with Wise Leaders**

Thank you for your Low Risk Notification which was received on 21 October 2009.

Your project has been recorded on the Low Risk Database which is reported in the Annual Report of the Massey University Human Ethics Committees.

The low risk notification for this project is valid for a maximum of three years.

Please notify me if situations subsequently occur which cause you to reconsider your initial ethical analysis that it is safe to proceed without approval by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees.

Please note that travel undertaken by students must be approved by the supervisor and the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor and be in accordance with the Policy and Procedures for Course-Related Student Travel Overseas. In addition, the supervisor must advise the University's Insurance Officer.

**Please ensure that the following statement is included in all information provided to participants during recruitment (eg, information sheet, preamble to questionnaire, etc):**

*"This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.*

*If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Professor Sylvia Rumball, Assistant to the Vice-Chancellor (Research Ethics), telephone 06 350 5249, e-mail humanethics@massey.ac.nz".*

Please note that if a sponsoring organisation, funding authority or a journal in which you wish to publish requires evidence of committee approval (with an approval number), you will have to provide a full application to one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. You should also note that such an approval can only be provided prior to the commencement of the research.

Yours sincerely

Sylvia V Rumball (Professor)  
**Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and  
Assistant to the Vice-Chancellor (Research Ethics)**

cc Dr Ralph Bathurst  
Department of Management and  
International Business  
**Albany**

Assoc Prof John Monin, HoD  
Department of Management and  
International Business  
**Albany**

Prof Ralph Stablein  
Department of Management  
**PN214**

Prof Claire Massey, HoD  
Department of Management  
**PN214**

Massey University Human Ethics Committee  
Accredited by the Health Research Council



**8.2 Appendix ii: Introductory email**

**Email sent to potential participants from HR Director of ACME 19 January 2010:**

Dear Colleague

We have had a request from a Masters student, Sharon Rowland, to assist in her area of research, which is Leadership. Sharon has asked to interview 10 people from different parts of our organization – with different functional experience and length of service. I have nominated you to assist her in the research, which will take an hour of your time.

I have asked [Blake] to liaise with yourself and Sharon to arrange a suitable time during work hours at your site for the interview to be conducted over next couple of weeks. Please note the interviews are completely confidential and [ACME] will not receive any transcripts or details of any of the interviews.

Please find below a note from Sharon introducing her self and her research proposal.

I would appreciate your assistance, if however you feel you are unable to assist please let me know.

Regards

**Attached to this email was my introduction:**

Hello, my name is Sharon Rowland and I am a student studying for my masters in management. I am currently conducting research in the area of Leadership, particularly in regards to wisdom. As part of this research I need to do a series of one hour interviews with a range of people. These interviews are voluntary and unstructured ie they are more like a conversation. I would like to talk to you about your experiences of leaders you have worked for and with. I will be asking for your opinions and observations. This is not a study about [ACME] but concerns business generally.

The information you provide will be recorded for academic purposes only with total confidentiality. Any possible identifiers of yourself or anyone/company discussed will be removed.

Regards  
Sharon

### **8.3 Appendix iii: Information sheet**

#### **Exploring Leadership Wisdom**

#### **INFORMATION SHEET**

##### **Researcher(s) Introduction**

My name is Sharon Rowland and this study is the research requirement for a Masters in Management. This project is focusing on the issues of leadership and wisdom.

##### **Project Description and Invitation**

The purpose of this research is to gain greater understanding as to what leadership wisdom means. 'Wisdom is concerned less with how we know and more with what we do and how we act' (McKenna, Rooney & Boal, 2009, p. 187). Through interviewing, I plan to build a picture of leadership wisdom through the experience and perspective of those who have encountered what they believe to be leadership wisdom.

I would like to invite you to participate in this research by agreeing to being interviewed.

##### **Participant Identification and Recruitment**

While this research is not focused on SCA HA, all participants have been selected from within the company. Participants have been selected on the following criteria:

- 5+ years of experience in the work force
- Representatives from throughout the various departments

As this research is conducted via in-depth interviews, only 10 participants will be interviewed.

##### **Project Procedures**

Your involvement will be to participate in one informal, open interview. It is expected that the interview will take one hour. There may be a need for a follow up interview to provide any clarification but this will be in the form of a phone call and will be short in duration (less than 10 minutes). The day and time of the interview will be at the participants convenience and will be held in a meeting room of the participants place of work. As all details will be kept confidential, any personal or business identifiers will be removed.

##### **Data Management**

The data collected during interviews will be transcribed and reviewed by the researcher. Data will be stored by the researcher's supervisor. The data will be analysed and provide the research data for the purpose of an academic thesis. No reference to identity of the subjects will be made and any specific names or situations will be changed in order to maintain confidentiality of participants.

##### **Participant's Rights**

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
  - withdraw from the study (before March 1 2010);
  - ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
  - provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
  - be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.
- 
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

### **Project Contacts**

Researcher: Sharon Rowland  
041 664 0190  
[nzrowlands@gmail.com](mailto:nzrowlands@gmail.com)

Supervisor: Dr Ralph Bathurst  
[r.bathurst@massey.ac.nz](mailto:r.bathurst@massey.ac.nz)

Supervisor: Dr Ralph Stablein  
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*This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.*

*If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Professor Sylvia Rumball, Assistant to the Vice-Chancellor (Research Ethics), telephone 06 350 5249, email [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz)".*

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