Developing Practically Wise Leaders through Serious Play

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Abstract

The contemporary challenge of leadership has been framed in terms of dealing authentically, ethically and effectively with the complexity and uncertainty of organizational life. In this paper, we draw on research in the fields of psychology and philosophy to introduce practical wisdom as a new way to conceptualize optimal leadership practice. We go on to propose that practically wise leaders can be effectively developed using serious play techniques. We present empirical data to illustrate this proposition and we close by outlining several implications for the field of consulting psychology.

Keywords: leadership development; practical wisdom; serious play

Introduction

In today's complex and uncertain world, leaders as well as leadership scholars, educators and consultants deal with the challenge of how to respond authentically, ethically and effectively to the situations that arise in the course of organizational life. In this contemporary context, an increasing number of people have begun to pay serious attention to ancient philosophical traditions in which such challenges, and the ways of responding to them, were analyzed and debated at length. Recent research collaboration between researchers at the Imagination Lab Foundation in Lausanne, Switzerland and the University of Missouri-Columbia has focused on the classical Greek concept of "practical wisdom" (*phronesis*) as a description of optimal leadership practice, as well as on the similarly time-honored tradition of taking play seriously as a way to develop such wisdom. This paper presents theoretical and empirical support for the proposition that serious play can facilitate the development of practical wisdom among organizational leaders.

Re-framing the Practice of Leadership

> *"[We hope] to go to the oldest, oldest, oldest wine with respect to leadership and to then build a new blend and bottle that provides a unique perspective on what constitutes the very core aspects of authentic leadership. By starting where the Greeks left off, we hope to rediscover the lessons…that the Enron's, Worldcom's and Global Crossing's have unfortunately forgotten or ignored"*
>
> *(Avolio et al, 2004: 818).*

Leadership practice in today's organizations involves increasing complexity and uncertainty (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001). In this context, leaders are called upon to integrate a variety of distinct value systems and priorities as they respond to macro-level societal dynamics as well as micro-level organizational dynamics. More precisely, leaders face contradictory imperatives (Margolis & Walsh, 2003) that require them to manage complex social and moral

dilemmas (Dawes, 1980) and cope with necessary evils (Molinsky & Margolis, 2005) while seeking to achieve the organization's performance objectives.

In response to the practical need in organizations for leadership that is both ethical and effective, new and alternative theoretical conceptualizations are emerging that address leadership as an empowering activity that can be shared or distributed among self-managing members of a group or organization (Bradford & Cohen 1998; Cox et al 2003; Manz & Sims, 1995, 2000; Pearce & Sims 2002; Pearce & Conger 2003; Sims & Lorenzi 1992). Following a service orientation, other researchers have conceptualized leadership as stewardship (Greenleaf, 1977; Block, 1993; Spears, 1998) in an effort to replace the traditional management tools of control and consistency with partnership and responsible choice throughout the organization (Bratton et al, 2004). Promisingly, organizational research has also begun to explore how leadership can be effective and simultaneously authentic (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Avolio et al., 2005; Ilies et al., 2005) and ethically responsible (e.g. Ciulla, 1995, 1998, 2004; Coles, 2000; House et al., 2004; Kanungo & Mendonca, 1996; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Rooke & Torbert, 1998; Sanders et al., 2003).

In view of these new directions in leadership research, the concept of 'practical wisdom' provides a way to describe leadership practices that optimally integrate the demands for ethics and effectiveness in organizations faced by complexity and uncertainty. This concept is most frequently addressed within a philosophical tradition (cf. especially Gadamer, 1960; Ricoeur, 1986; Nussbaum, 2001) that begins with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1960). Aristotle defines practical wisdom (Greek, *phronesis*) as a virtuous habit that involves balancing between extremes of thought, speech and action in such a way that effectively contributes to the common good.[1] Aristotle is careful to differentiate practical wisdom from science, claiming that while science involves rational understanding of the necessary laws and principles in the natural world, practical

[1] Aristotle's term is *eudaimonia*, which has been variously translated as 'happiness' or 'well-being', and variously interpreted to be common among households, groups, societies and even humanity at large. We cannot pretend to resolve these grand issues here – let it suffice to note that one of the ethical challenges frequently facing organizational leaders today involves a balancing of shareholder interests with stakeholder interests that include customers, partners, the broader community, and the future generations that will depend on environmental sustainability.

wisdom involves not just reason but also those human desires, emotions and aesthetic judgments relevant to action in the challenging and complex circumstances of the social world.

Psychologists have more recently drawn on this Aristotelian philosophical tradition in their efforts to extend our understanding of human intelligence. In this field, practical wisdom is now variously characterized as "an expert knowledge system dealing with the fundamental pragmatics of life" (Baltes & Kuntzman, 2004, p. 294), as "the application of intelligence, creativity and knowledge to the common good" (Sternberg, 2004, p. 287), and as "an integration of cognitive, reflective and affective personality characteristics" (Ardelt, 2004, p. 274). Practical wisdom has also been associated with such positive human qualities as good judgment skills, psychological health, humor, autonomy, and maturity.[2] Educational psychologists have further emphasized the importance of imagination for the development and exercise of wisdom (Noel, 1999).

These research findings indicate that practical wisdom may provide a meaningful conceptual framework for optimal leadership practice. Specifically, we suggest that the philosophical roots of the concept merit further exploration by consulting psychologists in view of the complex and ambiguous circumstances facing organizational leaders today.[3] By extension, we suggest that practically wise leaders can optimally strike a golden mean (Aristotle, 1960) and balance the contradictory performance imperatives of ethics and effectiveness in a complex and uncertain world.

This re-framed conceptualization of leadership raises a series of theoretical, empirical and pragmatic questions. Theoretically, how does the character of the practically wise individual leader relate to the charisma that has been identified as an important leadership trait (Conger & Kanungo, 1987)? How does the practically wise leader's capacity to balance short-, medium-, and long-term time horizons relate to the capacity of the visionary leader (Kouzes & Posner, 1987) to chart the course of the organization? How might the democratic leader (Dew, 1995) effectively balance interests within an organization, and thereby be practically wise? How might

[2] Citation information for each of these qualities can be found in Ardelt (2004: 280).

[3] For example, working from his balance theory of wisdom, Robert Sternberg recently (2003) constructed a model of leadership that involves wisdom, intelligence and creativity. We applaud this effort, but recall that as far as Aristotle is concerned, *phronesis* already includes intelligence and creativity, and thus does not need to be considered as a separate component of a composite model of leadership.

the transformational (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999) leader's capacity to enable people in the organization to undergo positive change exemplify a shaping of the environment associated with practical wisdom? How does the practically wise concern for the common good relate to the relational model of leadership (Wheatley, 1992) that presupposes the primacy of relationships between people rather than individual autonomy and interest maximization?

At an empirical level, are there specific leadership challenges for which practical wisdom is more or less appropriate? Are there specific forms of organization, or segments of industry to which practical wisdom is more or less relevant? Is it possible to differentiate between levels of hierarchy within an organization at which practical wisdom is more or less important?

It is not our intention to explore all of these questions here. Instead, in the following section, we respond to the pragmatic question that may arise from the perspective of leaders and leadership educators: if practical wisdom can allow leaders to integrate ethics and effectiveness in a complex and ambiguous world, how then can we develop it?

Developing Practically Wise Leaders through Serious Play

> *The very fact that play contains so much nonsense, so much replication, and is so flexible certainly suggests that it is a prime domain for the actualization of whatever the brain contains. And for that matter, speaking in behavioral rather than neurological terms, play is typically a primary place for the expression of anything that is humanly imaginable"*
>
> *(Sutton-Smith, 1997: 226).*

Having already broadened our historical lens to include insights from ancient Greek philosophers, we also acknowledge the long tradition of using aesthetically-rich experiences as a method of developing the habits of mind and body associated with wise leadership. Plato famously advocated music and gymnastic as the activities appropriate for the education of the leaders and guardians of his ideal city-state, the *Republic* (1991). In a similar gesture, Aristotle emphasized the importance of theater for the maintenance of democratic political structures (1990). Perhaps more familiar to contemporary readers is the juxtaposition of the arts and the

humanities with respect to the sciences in the university curriculum – where the 'soft' skills and competencies have historically been affirmed as necessary to balance the 'hard' sciences with moral and aesthetic judgments about what is right and appropriate for society.

Intricately interwoven with these pedagogical perspectives and techniques is the similarly long tradition of using play as a method of developing adaptive human potential (Sutton-Smith, 1997). In short, research indicates that play has a) the cognitive benefit of drawing on the imagination to develop new insights (cf. Piaget, 1958), b) the social benefit of developing new frames for interaction (cf. Goffman, 1974; Vygotsky, 1978), and c) the emotional benefits of providing positive affective associations as well as a safe context in which to take risks, to try on new roles, and to explore new potential forms of practice (cf. Bateson, 1972).

In view of these multidisciplinary research findings, serious play has been introduced in the organizational studies literature as a process concept (Roos, Victor & Statler, 2004; Jacobs and Statler, 2005; Statler, 2005) that describes how the emergent benefits of play can be brought to bear on serious organizational challenges such as strategy-making. Specifically, serious play has been defined as "a mode of activity that draws on the imagination, integrates cognitive, social and emotional dimensions of experience, and intentionally brings the emergent benefits of play to bear on organizational challenges" (Roos, Victor & Statler, 2004, p. 563). Thus whereas the Greek philosophers recognized that music, gymnastic and the arts provide way to develop the practical wisdom necessary to lead a city-state, contemporary strategy research indicates that "[w]hen we engage in serious play, we create the conditions for the possibility of the emergence of new forms of meaning and new patterns of action" (Jacobs & Statler, 2005, p.51) in organizations.

We believe this research suggests additionally that serious play may provide a way to develop practically wise organizational leaders. In this regard, we use the term serious play to refer to specific process techniques that provide participants with an opportunity to 'play' with elements of their 'serious' work as leaders. The techniques encourage a playful mode of experience as a way to provide participants with a safe encounter with the ambiguity and complexity of their own organizational life. They also utilize a three-dimensional medium of

expression as a way to emphasize the perceptual, tactile, and aesthetic dimensions of that lived experience. Seriously playful process techniques additionally provide an occasion for participants to experiment with new social frames for interaction with diverse others, and thereby, to encounter and develop ethical norms. Finally, by providing people with an occasion to bring the inherent ambiguity of play to bear on these multiple dimensions of their experience, serious play processes can cultivate their adaptive potential as leaders.

In view of these theoretical insights, our proposition is that serious play can enable the development of practical wisdom among organizational leaders. In the following section, we present a case illustration as empirical support for this proposition.

Case Illustration: Developing Leaders in an Academic Context

In early 2005, the authors conducted a three-hour consultative session involving a group of eleven university leaders from three different campuses of a Midwestern state university. Participants included five faculty administrators (e.g., department chairs and college deans); a senior system-wide administrator; three consulting psychologists who were actively involved in leadership development programs at the university; a director of a campus-wide employee assistance program; and a senior administrator with the university extension system. The group included three men and eight women. While some of the participants had previously met, most of the participants did not know each other prior to this event. The group had been assembled by the senior system administrator, who had selected the individual participants based on their demonstrated interest in leadership development. This administrator, in his invitation to the session, described its purpose explicitly as an opportunity to engage in an innovative, interactive activity using serious play to explore leadership in an academic environment.

The activity was facilitated by two of the co-authors, while the third co-author gathered video and participant observation data. The facilitators had seated the participants around tables, dividing them into two groups that contained a balanced distribution of the various professional roles, personal relationships and genders.

The four-hour session began with verbal self-introductions from each of the participants and facilitators. Each participant selected a random assortment of LEGO bricks from a table where several hundred bricks of a wide variety of shapes, sizes and colors were scattered. After the participants had selected their bricks and returned to their tables, the facilitators utilized warm-up exercises designed to allow the participants to become familiar with the medium, to begin assigning metaphorical significance to their constructions, and to practice storytelling using their models as points of reference.

After the warm-up exercises, each participant was asked to use the available materials to build a model of leadership based on his/her own individual experience. Following the completion of those constructions, each participant was asked to describe his/her creation to the other participants at the table. During this activity, the facilitators assisted the participants in closely examining the constructions and posing questions and comments about the constructions and/or their descriptions. Table 1 presents detailed evidence of what emerged, including physical descriptions of selected models that were built and participant comments that coincided with each of those models.

<<insert Table 1 about here >>

Following the sharing of the individual stories, each group was instructed collectively "to build leadership in an academic environment" and to develop a shared story about the construction. A representative from each table then told the story of their construction to those from the other table who had gathered around to view the construction. Table 2 presents detailed evidence of what emerged from this exercise, including photographs of the two models that were built and selected verbal descriptions of those constructions.

<<insert Table 2 about here>>

Following a series of questions and answers about the two constructions, the participants gathered for an additional hour to discuss and reflect on the serious play experience, including its

relevance for leadership development in the academic context. Detailed evidence of this discussion is presented in Text Box 1 in the form of participant quotes.

<<insert Text Box 1 about here>>

The participant quotes in Text Box 1 indicate clearly that the serious play process generated a positive response from the participants with very high levels of engagement and participation. Individuals were frequently observed leaning forward toward their constructions, pointing to the physical models to support and clarify their comments. Each participant actively discussed his/her own model and provided comments on other constructions. A high level of positive affect was present, in the form of laughter, smiles and gentle teasing about constructions. At the same time, the exercise generated serious consideration of many of the difficult challenges inherent in leadership in an academic environment such as faculty/staff tensions, university/community relationships, the sometimes controversial role of the athletic department and addressing complex student concerns.

The activities described in this case illustration can certainly be characterized as serious play in accordance with the theoretical considerations introduced above. We can describe the participants' behaviors as play insofar as they were drawing on their imagination, demonstrating a playful mode of intentionality, and able to integrate multiple dimensions of experience. Yet the activity was very serious, insofar as the participants were interacting around very complex organizational challenges, based on their own professional leadership experiences. Through their interactions with other leaders, they had the opportunity to learn to appreciate multiple other perspectives, and to create the conditions for the possibility of new forms of meaning and action.

The behaviors exhibited by the participants in this process also exemplified the circumstances and characteristics associated with practical wisdom. In both their constructions and their stories, they were confronting complex and ambiguous circumstances. They additionally appeared to be relying on their own expert knowledge of how to lead in academic environments, while additionally drawing on their own innate intelligence and creativity. Finally,

they appeared to be exercising their imagination as they sought to develop new ways to balance the contradictory performance imperatives of ethics and effectiveness.

Thus we suggest that the serious play process contributed to the development of practical wisdom among this group of leaders. The playful process mode provided an emotionally safe and positive space in which to deal with ambiguity and complexity within the academic environment. The three-dimensional medium emphasized the importance of aesthetic and perceptual dimensions of experience in addition to the cognitive, thus drawing on tacit as well as explicit knowledge. To the extent that the serious play process cultivated the adaptive potential of the participants, it also enabled them to develop new ways of balancing the contradictory performance demands of ethics and effectiveness. And in view of their various comments, we can see the practically wise leader in an academic organization as a "benevolent enforcer" who is "accessible" with an "internal" and an "external" viewpoint, while distributing resources "equitably" and maintaining lines of "open communication."

Conclusion and Directions for Future Research and Practice

We believe the foregoing empirical illustration supports our theoretical proposition that serious play can enable the development of practical wisdom among leaders in organizations. In response to the recent call for increased methodological rigor (Lowman, 2005), we acknowledge the limitations of our research with respect to this proposition: for example, our sample size was limited; the sample group was not necessarily representative of the full spectrum of leader populations; the serious play intervention process may prove difficult to replicate precisely; and our findings cannot be generalized. And yet, in spite of these limitations, we believe that the case does illustrate our proposition that serious play can enable the development of practically wise leaders. We hope that our findings might inspire both future research (including the development and empirical testing of hypotheses) and future leadership development activities (including more robust process techniques as well as assessment protocols) within the field of consulting psychology.

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Appendix

Table 1

Description of Participant Constructions with Coinciding Comments

Participant Constructions	**Comments**
Structure in which subordinates and leader are all bunched together.	"This structure represents the belief that a leader needs to be a follower as well. It also represents the belief that we have to be able to collaborate and work as a team. I view leadership as a team effort. We need to bring individuals with different strengths to the table, some may be creative, some may have lots of ideas, some may be pretty solid."
Group of LEGO people with rubber bands stretched around the group.	"This demonstrates how we are bound by our mission or goals."
A construction with a leader holding gold coins (representing money).	This represents "the leader's role to help find resources".
A LEGO person getting ready to jump from a constructed platform.	This "represents the risks leaders have to take".
A LEGO person representing a leader with a Sheriff's badge on his shirt.	This "represents how you have to be a benevolent enforcer… not a heavy hand; faciliatory benevolence but still a firm enforcer".
A LEGO person carrying a blue flag object which was used to represent a banner.	"This represents how [the leader] needs to be the waiver or banner carrier for [his/her] unit."
A yellow flag was placed on top of a multi-leveled platform construction.	A leader "has to really try to accentuate the positive; has to be a cheerleader; it's good to think of the positive aspects of things".
A structure with one red object sticking up higher than the rest.	This construction "represents the infrastructure of the unit". The red object represents "all the things that clamor for the leader's attention. There is always something more prominent calling for attention. Of course, things can always shift. If the leader was to start messing with the big one [object rising up from others], one of the other snake heads may come up and bite him; the debate is always which thing to tend to".

Table 2

Images of Group Constructions and Coinciding Comments

Image	Comments
  	"I think when you first look at it, it looks so neat and contained. And then when we look at it some more we couldn't really tell who the leader was. So I think from the outside, it's very difficult to know…how things from the outside get in. And I suspect everyone on the inside knows, but the people on the outside don't know. These people over here.. is there contact with the faculty, do they expand that contact through these extensions over there? It's really powerful to see how things lead to.. connect to the leader." "… it's very difficult for people from the outside looking in to really understand what the university is…" "This is the athletic department and even though it's not supposed to overshadow everything… sometimes it's the biggest thing that people see from the outside even though that may not be what we intended." "These represent communication among the different units that sometimes works; sometimes there's good communication between and among units and sometimes there isn't. So it's not as consistent as we would like." "There seems to be a perception of a hoarding of resources and a lack of distribution of resources…" "What I love about the antennas [included in our model is that they] are used to communicate incoming and outgoing collaboration" "We made sure that individuals have access to the leader. Initially the leader was sort of up there and nobody really had access to him or her. So we want our leader to be accessible, we want them to be intuitive, we want the leader to be able to look out externally and internally to understand what's going on around him or her. We want the leader to be able to distribute resources equitably. We want communication lines to be open, we want the leader to help establish a vision and a mission."

Text Box 1

Participant Discussion Quotes

"I was certainly aware of plenty of affect present… at least for myself. I had lots of thoughts but lots of feelings too."

This is great … for sharing your ideas. You could have just stood up in front of us and said, ok what do you think leadership is? And that would have been boring. But this way our ideas had to evolve. I saw that in the beginning you were all more concrete and as the day went on you got more creative and we were able to really you know … get in a more creative rhythm."

[The process works] "..to help us think in a different way about the leadership and express that…"

"This (serious play process) bypasses all the reasons people wouldn't say how they felt or wouldn't contribute."

"Seeing what people consistently built… It was kind of enlightening for me because suddenly I am seeing what these people are thinking and you don't often get a chance to do that in a non-threatening way."

"It forced me to quickly snap what I think about my work into a metaphor."