

# OLDER DOESN'T ALWAYS MEAN WISER



*Library perspective of books. Photo by: Brian Archer*

## How to cultivate wisdom intentionally

The idea that “with age comes wisdom” is not unfounded. In ancient societies, the oldest members of a community were often in fact the wisest. Their ability to gather knowledge and skills and figure out how to apply them in a harsh environment made them a valued source of what to do and what not to do, just to survive.

Times have changed. In our modern society, filled with modern conveniences, pure survival is typically (and gratefully) not a daily challenge for most of us. So, who we have come to deem as wise has also evolved.

### What Is Wisdom?

We now have easy access to vast amounts of information, but wisdom is so much more than

the accumulation of facts and knowledge; it's more than experiences lived or even the skills we've developed from those experiences. Living longer gives us the opportunity to have more and varied experiences but doesn't guarantee we grow wiser as a result. Acquiring wisdom requires the ability to reflect on and learn from new knowledge and experiences.

Reflection allows us to develop a robust set of principles that we can apply to future experiences and situations that are new, more complex, and where outcomes are less certain. Wisdom gives us the ability to discern the important from the unimportant, make sound judgements in complex situations, and navigate uncertainty adeptly and calmly.

**“You will be as wise as your ability to acquire principles and apply them through significant action.”**

~ Dr. Gerald D. Bell

## Why Is Wisdom Critical for Leaders?

Many of us have been lucky enough to experience a wise leader firsthand. It's likely we've also known a leader who was not so wise and can bear witness to the results of that deficit. But why exactly is wisdom so critical to effective leadership?



1

### WISE LEADERS MAKE BETTER DECISIONS

Leaders must make decisions, and the best decisions are informed decisions. Wisdom enables leaders to take in relevant information, assess a situation and apply good judgement. They won't get every decision right, but over time, wise leaders will make fewer mistakes and bring greater value to their organizations.



2

### WISE LEADERS ATTRACT THE BEST PEOPLE

No leader can go it alone. Successful organizations have leaders who build teams that work hard, work smart, and work together. Cultivating wisdom and being willing to share that wisdom with those around you attracts the highest quality team members.



3

### WISE LEADERS ARE HAPPIER, MORE SUCCESSFUL, AND CONTRIBUTE MORE

As Dr. Bell would say, happiness, success, and the ability to contribute are the ultimate goals for any leader. Wisdom helps us to achieve all three.

## How Do You Cultivate Wisdom?

The practice of building wisdom is intentional. We all experience a variety of potentially “teachable moments.” But it takes dedicated time and mindful effort to actually learn from those experiences. The personal investment in cultivating your wisdom is returned tenfold by growing your leadership mastery and the results that follow.

**Seek out experiences.** We often learn best from practical experiences and interactions with others. Seeking a wide variety of experiences and new challenges and pursuing conversations and relationships with people from different backgrounds, ages, and cultures will broaden your perspective and maximize your opportunity to learn.

**Stay curious and ask questions.** Approach every situation with a humble and open mind. We absorb more by setting aside our egos and



acknowledging that we all have something to learn. It's hard to know what we don't know. Asking questions opens up new paths of discovery.

**Capture learnings and reflect.** So many of our experiences wash over us before we can extract the lessons found within them, so it is important to capture each experience quickly.

Find time to record your learnings. Note 1) the situation, 2) your thinking, 3) your actions, and 4) your results. Once captured, set aside consistent, dedicated time to reflect on them and return to them. Your thinking will evolve over time. We all tend to reflect on our losses, but it is just as important to reflect on our successes. We grow our wisdom by learning from mistakes and successes. And though self-reflection is critical, reflecting through conversations with peers, colleagues, and trusted mentors can bring new levels of insight.

**Develop and accumulate principles.** One of the most difficult but important parts of the process is extracting, deducing, and drawing out principles from your learnings. Any experience can provide valuable learning, but the key is to mine your varied experiences and learnings for themes that lead to robust principles that can be impactfully applied in the future.

**Apply your principles through significant action.** There would be little point to accumulating a large inventory of principles if we never translated them into action. Find opportunities to apply your principles to new and increasingly complex challenges and opportunities, allowing you to approach them differently than you would have before.

The process of building wisdom is not linear and like all “practices,” it is continuous. There is no end point. It is inspiring to realize the amount of wisdom we can accumulate over a lifetime is unbounded.

We hope you will be inspired to carve out space in your own busy schedule to develop your own principles and plan for how you can put them into action.

*It's those leaders who devote themselves to this practice that truly become wise.*



## How Do We Recognize Wisdom in Ourselves?

Wisdom can feel like an elusive concept; one that is difficult to define, but "we know it when we see it." We can all probably quickly identify 2-3 individuals in our lives and careers we would recognize as wise. But how do we assess our own level of wisdom? How do we judge if we are in fact growing wiser or just getting older? It may help to ask yourself:

- Do colleagues, team members, family and friends consistently turn to you for counsel in times of struggle or uncertainty?
- Is your advice sought out more frequently or by more people than in the past?

If you answered yes to either, **congratulations!** You are wise and growing wiser.

They may not be the eldest or in the most senior positions, but the wisest members of our communities are those we know to ask for help when there is a tough question, problem, or new opportunity.