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Moving from knowledge to wisdom, from ordinary consciousness to extraordinary consciousness

Alex Bennet and David Bennet¹
Mountain Quest Institute, Frost, West Virginia, USA

Abstract

Purpose—To explore the relationships among knowledge, wisdom, consciousness and extraordinary consciousness.

Design/methodology/approach—After introducing knowledge, this paper provides (1) a short review of the literature on the concept of wisdom, (2) an introduction to the concepts of ordinary and extraordinary consciousness, and (3) a brief exploration of the relationships among these concepts.

Findings—Tacit knowledge is in relationship to wisdom. Since extraordinary consciousness by definition is heightened sensitivity to, awareness of, and connection with our unconscious mind, extraordinary consciousness is in support of wisdom.

Originality/value—Introduces concept of extraordinary consciousness

Keywords wisdom, extraordinary consciousness, ordinary consciousness, tacit knowledge

Paper type Conceptual

In a 2005 research study (Bennet, 2005), 27 of the 34 knowledge management thought leaders interviewed tied knowledge to action. Similarly, we define knowledge as *the capacity (potential or actual) to take effective action in varied and uncertain situations* (Bennet & Bennet, 2004). In the brain, we consider knowledge as composed of two parts: Knowledge (Informing) and Knowledge (Proceeding). This builds on the distinction made by Ryle (1949) between "knowing that" and "knowing how".

Knowledge (Informing), or Kn_i , is the *information* part of knowledge. It represents insights, meaning, understanding, expectations, theories and principles that support or lead to effective action. When viewed separately this part of knowledge is information that *may* lead to effective action. Knowledge (Proceeding), or Kn_p , represents the

¹ David Bennet and Alex Bennet are founders of the Mountain Quest Institute, a research and retreat center located in the Allegheny Mountains of West Virginia. They are co-authors of the new theory of the firm—*Organizational Survival in the New World: The Intelligent Complex Adaptive System* (Elsevier, 2004)—and, more recently, *Knowledge Mobilization in the Social Sciences and Humanities* (MQIPress, 2007). See www.mountainquestinstitute.com

*process of selecting information from a situation at hand and mixing it with internal information to develop new information (Kn_i) that guides and drives effective action.*²

As with knowledge so with wisdom; a rich diversity of definitions and descriptions abound. Focusing on work occurring around the turn of this century, Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura (2005) described wisdom as referring to two distinct phenomena. The first was the *content* of wisdom (information) and the second an individual's *capacity to think or act* wisely. Focusing on the content of wisdom, Clayton and Birren (1980) said that individuals perceived wisdom differently when socio-demographic variables were changed, that is, as we now recognize about knowledge, they considered wisdom as context-sensitive and situation dependent. The works of Holliday and Changler (1986); Erikson (1998), Sternberg (1990), Jarvis (1992), Kramer and Bacelar (1994), Bennett-Woods (1997), Merriam and Caffarella (1999) all take the position that wisdom is grounded in life's rich experiences,

... [wisdom] therefore is developed through the process of aging ... wisdom seems to consist of the ability to move away from absolute truths, to be reflective to make sound judgments related to our daily existence, whatever our circumstances. (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999, p. 165).

A number of writers have considered wisdom as a part of intelligence (Smith, Dixon and Baltes, 1989; Dittmann-Kohli and Baltes, 1990). Baltes and Smith (1990) go on to say that wisdom is "a highly developed body of factual and procedural knowledge and judgment dealing with what we call the 'fundamental pragmatics of life'." In contrast, from qualitative research with Buddhist monks, Levitt (1999) said that the monks tended toward a spiritual definition and believed that all people were capable of wisdom, regardless of their intellect. From a similar persuasion, Trumpa (1991) sees wisdom as a state of consciousness with the qualities of spaciousness, friendliness, warmth, softness and joy. Similarly, Woodman and Dickinson (1996) see wisdom as the state of consciousness that allows the spiritual Self to be active. Wisdom also appears to have an affective component (Brown, 2000). The neurobiological roots of this were confirmed by Sherman (2000) who discovered that some brain-damaged patients who lacked wisdom also lacked the evaluative affects used to choose a course of action (make a decision).

In the early years of knowledge management, a number of authors argued that wisdom was the end of a continuum made up of data→information→knowledge→wisdom. But, as Peter Russell explains,

Various people have pointed to the progression of data to information to knowledge ... Continuing the progression suggests that something derived from knowledge leads to the emergence of a new level, what we call wisdom. But what is it that knowledge gives us that takes us beyond knowledge? Through knowledge we learn how to act in our own better interests. Will this decision lead

² This text was introduced in Bennet, David and Bennet, Alex (2008), "Associative Patterning: The Unconscious Life of an Organization" in Girard, J.P. (Ed.), *Organizational Memory*, ICI Global: Hershey, PA.

to greater well-being, or greater suffering? What is the kindest way to respond in this situation? ... Wisdom reflects the values and criteria that we apply to our knowledge. Its essence is discernment. Discernment of right from wrong. Helpful from harmful. Truth from delusion. (Russell, 2007)

Around the turn of the century, the U.S. Department of the Navy placed knowledge at the beginning and wisdom near the end of their change model based on the seven levels of consciousness (Porter, et al, 2003; Bennet & Bennet, 2004). The change model consists of the following progression to facilitate increased connectedness and heightened consciousness: (1) closed structured concepts, (2) focused by limited sharing, (3) awareness and connectedness through sharing, (4) creating concepts and sharing these concepts with others, (5) advancement of new knowledge shared with humanity at large, (6) creating wisdom, teaching, and leading, and (7) creating (and sharing) new thought in a fully aware and conscious process.³ In this model, prior to reaching wisdom at level 6, there is the insertion of value (framed in the context of the greater good). Value was absent in the discussion of knowledge in support of the earlier levels of the model since the positive or negative value of knowledge is situation-dependent and context sensitive. Similarly, Nussbaum (2000) forwards that all knowledge is in the service of wisdom. Nelson (2004) says that wisdom is the knowledge of the essential nature of reality. Further, similar to what was expressed in the Navy model, Sternberg defines wisdom as “the application of tacit knowledge as mediated by values toward the goal of achieving a common good” (Sternberg, 1998, p. 353), thus suggesting that tacit knowledge is a prerequisite for developing wisdom and wisdom is defined in a social rather than individual context.

In a comparative study of two groups (one characterized as elderly and one characterized as creative), Orwoll Perlmutter (1990) discovered that wisdom was associated with advanced self-development and self-transcendence. Goldberg (a clinical professor of neurology) raises the question: if memory and mental focus decline with age, why is it that our wisdom and competence grow? After validating these two propositions, he answers the question by asserting that *tacit knowledge* does not suffer appreciable decline with age because it represents high-level patterns of procedural knowledge—knowledge of solving problems (Goldberg, 2005). These are patterns that represent chunks or groups of other patterns. If a mind has been active throughout life these high-level patterns represent competence, insight and deep (tacit) knowledge that may be considered wisdom. Thus while memory, specific facts and attention may decline with age, the knowledge of how to solve problems or what needs to be done in a specific situation does not appear to decline. Tacit knowledge and wisdom may remain strong and even continue to grow with age. What this also implies is that tacit knowledge—particularly as we age—is primarily process knowledge. See “Engaging

³ In order of growth toward wisdom and beyond, the seven levels of consciousness focus on: (1) structured concepts: material, ideological, causative; (2) spiritual concepts: focused and limited love at the personal level; (3) spiritual concepts: soul as part of a larger structure, awareness and connectedness through giving; (4) senses other souls: giving what is needed by others so they can create virtue; balance, humility and hierarchy of thought and need in giving virtue; (5) spiritual awareness: planetary level, advancement of new knowledge communicated to humanity and re-communicated in mental framework; contribution to development of civilization to assist in creating virtue; (6) understanding soul as part of God (wisdom): creating virtue, teaching in soul capacity, leading; and (7) awareness of soul as a functional part of God: creating more of God in a fully aware and conscious method (MacFlouer, 1999).

Tacit Knowledge in Support of Organizational Learning” in this issue of *VINE* for an in depth discussion of tacit knowledge.

Some core words associated with wisdom that appear throughout the literature include: *understanding* (Clayton and Birren, 1980; Chandler and Holliday, 1990; Orwoll and Perlmutter, 1990); *empathy* (Clayton and Birren, 1980; Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde, 1990; Chandler and Holliday, 1990; Levitt, 1999; Shedlock and Cornelius, 2000); *knowledge* (Baltes and Smith, 1990; Clayton and Birren, 1980; Sternberg, 1998; Shedlock and Cornelius, 2000); *knows self* (Chandler and Holiday, 1990; Levitt, 1999; Damon, 2000; Stevens, 2000; Shedlock and Cornelius, 2000); *living in balance* (Birren and Fisher, 1990; Meacham, 1990); *understanding* (Clayton and Barren, 1980; Chandler and Holliday, 1990; Levitt, 1999; Stevens, 2000); and *systemic thinking* (Chandler and Holliday, 1990; Stevens, 2000; Shedlock and Cornelius, 2000). Macdonald describes this systemic thinking as “acting with the well-being of the whole in mind” (Macdonald, 1996, p. 1). Further, Murphy (2000) points out that wisdom is at home in several levels of the hierarchy of complexity. As she observes, “understanding of a phenomenon at each level of the hierarchy can be enhanced by relating it to its neighboring levels” (Murphy, 2000, p. 7). Schloss explains that the levels of a hierarchy are interrelated via feedback loops; increased understanding results from following these feedback loops from one level to another and back again (Schloss, 2000). Similarly, Erikson says that a sense of the complexity of living is an attribute of wisdom. A wise person embraces the,

... sense of the complexity of living, of relationships, of all negotiations. There is certainly no immediate, discernible, and absolute right and wrong, just as light and dark are separated by innumerable shadings ... [the] interweaving of time and space, light and dark, and the complexity of human nature suggests that ... this wholeness of perception to be given partially and realized, must of necessity be made up of a merging of the sensual, the logical, and the aesthetic perceptions of the individual (Erikson, 1988, p. 184).

As can be noted in this brief treatment, the concept of wisdom is clearly related to knowledge—and in particular to tacit knowledge—and has also been related to the phenomenon of consciousness. Wisdom is clearly connected with systemic, hierarchical thinking, and the complexity of human nature has been brought into the discussion. Wisdom appears to deal with the cognitive and emotional, personal and social, as well as the moral and religious aspects of life. As Costa sums up in *Working Wisdom*:

Wisdom is the combination of knowledge and experience, but it is more than just the sum of these parts. Wisdom involves the mind and the heart, logic and intuition, left brain and right brain, but it is more than either reason, or creativity, or both. Wisdom involves a sense of balance, an equilibrium derived from a strong, pervasive *moral* conviction ... the conviction and guidance provided by the obligations that flow from a profound sense of interdependence. In essence, wisdom grows through the learning of more knowledge, and the practiced

experience of day-to-day life—both filtered through a code of moral conviction. (Costa, 1995, p. 3)

To quickly lay the groundwork for understanding our usage of consciousness, we provide representative viewpoints from several fields. The psychologist William James said that consciousness was the name of a non-entity in that it stands for the function of knowing (a process) (McDermott, 1977). The psychologist J. Allan Hobson considers consciousness as awareness of the world, the body and the self (Hobson, 1999). In neuroscience terms, this would be the sensitivity to outside stimuli as translated through the brain and neuron connections into patterns that to the mind represent thoughts. The Nobel Laureate physiologist Gerald Edelman considered consciousness as a process of the flow of thoughts, images, feelings and emotions (Edelman and Tononi 2000). The spiritualist Ramon describes consciousness as the “energized pool of intent from which all human experience springs” (Ramon, 1997, p. 48).

We agree that consciousness is a process, and not a state. It is private, continuous, always-changing and felt to be a sequential set of ideas, thoughts, images, feelings and perceptions (Bennet, 2001). Another high-level property of consciousness is its unity. The mind is continually integrating the incoming signals from the environment as well as connecting many different processing areas within the brain and combining them into a coherent flow of conscious thinking or feeling. When we see a snapshot of the visible world, it appears as a coherent, unified whole.

Ordinary consciousness represents the customary or typical state of consciousness, that which is common to everyday usage, or of the usual kind. Polanyi sees tacit knowledge as not part of one’s ordinary consciousness (Polanyi, 1958); thus tacit knowledge resides in the unconscious. To access tacit knowledge an individual needs to move beyond ordinary consciousness to what we call *extraordinary consciousness*, acquiring a greater sensitivity to information stored in the unconscious in order to facilitate the awareness and application of that information and knowledge. Extraordinary consciousness may be created through such techniques as meditation, lucid dreaming, hemispheric synchronization, and other ways of quieting the conscious mind, and by doing so allowing/encouraging accessibility to information in the unconscious. Such techniques create a heightened sensitivity to, awareness of, and connection with our unconscious mind together with its memory and thought processes.

In our earlier discussion of wisdom, Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura (1990) described wisdom as referring to two distinct phenomena: the content of wisdom and the capacity to think or act wisely. This parallels our understanding of knowledge as both Kn_I and Kn_P (described above). In other words, wisdom has an information component, W_I , and a process component, W_P . Knowledge and wisdom would then both deal with the *nature and structure of information*, with nature being (or representing) the quality or constitution of information and structure being (or representing) the process of building new information. Wisdom would represent higher discernment and the use of tacit knowledge to provide new, situation-dependent, context-sensitive knowledge—perhaps taking the form of intuition. The tacit knowledge

driving what is surfaced would be both Kn_I and Kn_P , although as noted by Goldberg (2005), primarily Kn_P . On the other hand, consciousness appears to be a flow, with extraordinary consciousness representing increased sensitivity to awareness of tacit knowledge. As a process, consciousness represents a characteristic of the human mind to be *aware* of the nature and structure of information. Moving beyond ordinary consciousness to extraordinary consciousness would increase this awareness.

As another point of comparison, wisdom has been repeatedly related to systemic thinking and the recognition of a higher order of interdependence in the hierarchy of life, perhaps even the universe. Similarly, extraordinary consciousness delimits ordinary consciousness, increasing sensitivity to, and awareness of, that which is tacit (that which is in the unconscious) whether embodied, affective, intuitive or spiritual. See “Engaging Tacit Knowledge in Support of Organizational Learning” in this issue of *VINE*. With this larger sensitivity and awareness of that which is tacit would come increased understanding of the interdependence associated with patterns of information, some of which would be patterns of patterns (possibly hierarchical in nature, although they might be represented by any three-dimensional patterns in space).

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the relationships among knowledge, consciousness and extraordinary consciousness. The dotted lines represent a movement from ordinary consciousness into extraordinary consciousness, at whatever level that may occur. The wavy lines represent the fluctuating boundary between explicit and tacit knowledge, with implicit knowledge describing what was thought tacit but triggered into consciousness by incoming information.

While there is much thinking and experimentation needed to truly understand wisdom, it is increasingly clear that extraordinary consciousness—expanding our sensitivity and awareness of that which is tacit—has an important role to play in developing this understanding.

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