



## President's Update

5 June 2011

If we accept that developing individuals on the basis of their aspirations is part of the leader's job in today's fast-moving global workplace, we need a word for leaders who do that well.

Wisdom best fits this special kind of ability: it is valued in all cultures and goes well with what we would expect from a humanistic approach to developing people. To become wise, leaders first need to tap into the source of their own humanity.

### Finding Your Humanity

A few years ago I was leading a session for high potential managers in an international phone company. Before I was to speak, a senior executive from the company was asked to say a few words to the group about becoming a leader. He told this story:

*When I was about the same age as you, I was leading a team and had a problem with one person -- Luke (not his real name). He was in his fifties and his performance on the job was slipping. Luke came to work late on some days. He looked tired and burned out. Even his appearance was starting to get seedy with his hair going thin in clumps and his shirts and trousers looking two sizes too large.*

*Being an ambitious young leader I was driven by performance. I didn't like Luke and frankly I would have felt a lot better if I could have shifted him out of my team to work somewhere else. But there were no openings available so I let the matter slide.*

*As the days and weeks went by, Luke seemed less and less engaged in his job and I even saw him nod off to sleep in one of my meetings. So I decided to "pull the plug" at the next performance review.*

*When that day came, Luke came into my office looking worse than ever before. But before I could start the performance interview Luke started crying and saying 'thank you for supporting me. You don't know how much that means to me.' I was a bit shaken by this outburst but I was not about to change my decision.*

*Then Luke said "I have been waiting to tell you this for some time. I'm dying of a nerve disease. The doctors told me it is incurable and I only have about*

*six months. I decided that the best thing for me was to keep going with my normal life, come to work and be with people. Your kindness and understanding kept me going even as I felt my body wasting away. Thanks to you, I am getting through the end of my life with dignity. Now I guess we have better tell the other team members.”*

*What I learned then as a leader is something I would like to pass on to you. Never assume that you can judge someone only on the basis of the job. You have to know your team members as individuals.*

The silence in the room was extraordinary. The speaker left the podium and it was my turn to give my speech. All I could say was – ladies and

## What is Humanistic Leadership?

A leader's natural humanity becomes humanistic leadership when there is a systematic set of values that define how to work with people.

As a philosophy humanism is a long river fed by tributaries from diverse cultures, philosophies and ethical systems. “Man is the measure of all things” was an early formulation by Pythagoras more than 24 centuries ago. Humanism has since been a dominant value system in Chinese Confucianism, in Medieval Islam and the European Renaissance.

An attempt to define modern principles was formulated in 2002 by World Humanist Congress in Amsterdam affirming that humanism is ethical, rational, supports democracy and human rights, combines personal liberty with social responsibility, is an alternative to dogmatic religion, values artistic creativity and imagination, and aims at cultivating ethics and creative living.

You not have to adopt all these principles to be a humanistic leader (I don't), but most humanistic leaders would agree that business should contribute human development, that leaders should develop the people they lead and that companies should promote the aspirational development of all employees.

gentlemen, I was going to talk to you about why humanity is important when you are a leader -- but our previous speaker said it all. I have nothing to add.

## The Foundations of Leadership Wisdom

Wisdom is becoming more acceptable as a quality of leaders because of the need to make decisions that have a positive impact for varied stakeholders.<sup>1</sup>

Leadership wisdom goes back twenty-five centuries to the Greek philosopher Aristotle in the Western tradition<sup>2</sup> and to Confucius in the Chinese tradition.<sup>3</sup> Humanistic values are being updated and applied to leadership.<sup>4</sup>

By using the word wisdom I do not mean leaders should become white-haired wizards out of a Harry Potter film. Wisdom may be sneered at in organizations that care only about short-term performance, but companies that take sustainable development seriously recognize the value of wise leaders. Wisdom is a two-sided coin: the performance side of practical wisdom is the ability to get things done but the development side of practical wisdom is the ability to understand and develop others.

Before building the skills of wisdom, you must start with some foundations. You cannot be an aspirational leader if you are lacking in humanity, if you have no knowledge or experience, if you are not able to listen to others and if you are unwilling to learn.



## Can you have Wisdom without Experience?

Concerning experience, which seems to be a key ingredient for wisdom, I would say that a leader has to start somewhere and a young leader without a lot of experience and knowledge to share with colleagues can compensate by using the other three building blocks: humanity, listening and learning.

How young leaders start on the road to wisdom is well described by Vineet Nayar, CEO of the Indian-based information technology services company HCL Technologies, who describes his first day of work.<sup>5</sup>

*The first day coming out business school, I joined HCL, and I became a boss of two people. And what I learned immediately is that they were as smart as me, their aspirations were just as great, but they did not know what to do. I also discovered that I did not know what to do, but I lied through my teeth in those early days, projecting this sense that I knew what had to be done.*

*I did not know where I had to go, and I was projecting as if I knew. I assume that you expect me to know where I am going, and you will respect me for that, and the day I tell you both of us are in the same boat, we would fail. That was a very big learning for me.*

*So, if you see your job not as chief strategy officer and the guy who has all the ideas, but rather the guy who is obsessed with enabling employees to*

*create value, I think you will succeed. That's a leadership style that evolved from my own understanding of the fact that I'm not the greatest and brightest leader born. My job is to make sure everybody is enabled to do what they do well.*

I do not believe Nayar would have got away with his lack of experience without humanity, listening and learning.

A leader who may have vast experience and knowledge will always lack the aspirational quality needed without the other three building blocks. On the other hand, experience and knowledge provide a big advantage for leaders who will tell you that not every employee is as smart and aspirational as the two that Nayar started out with. Knowledge and experience help leaders go beyond humanity, listening and learning to being able to deal with the hard cases. Not every employee is aspirational, not every business situation allows you to develop people, not every company culture values aspirational leadership.

## What Aspirational Leaders Do

Aspirational leadership is about understanding the aspirations of employees but it is not only about that.

It also means creating an aspirational culture and communicating the company's aspirations to employees.

Aspirational leadership is also about business performance: growth of the company, meeting client aspirations, shaping the message communicated by the brand, and making the company aspirational for shareholders and investors. Aspirational leadership means realizing win-win achievements—realizing the aspirational goals and expectations of the company as well as employees.

And there is of course a third win in the equation, the win for you as a leader and as a person. Realizing aspiratoins is win-win-win.

### What Aspirational Leaders Do

Being an aspirational leader does not stop with understanding employee aspirations. Leaders realize the company's aspirations and contribute to customer aspirations.

To lead people it is important to:

1. Create an aspirational work culture
2. Explore the dreams of employees that can be put to work
3. Match employee and company aspirations
4. Develop employees to become entrepreneurs
5. Master the new tools and techniques of aspirational leadership

Mastering the strategies, skills and tools of this new leadership role is what Metizo does particularly well in working with leaders. We help leaders create aspirational strategies and cultures in companies according to the business case, whether that be fast-growth, going global, mergers and acquisitions or renewal of the workforce.

Metizo has created tools and programs for matching the personal enterprise of people with the company's aspirational enterprise. For example, our mentoring program delivers certification not only for the participants of the program but also trains, supports and validates the competencies of aspirational leadership.

In this newsletter, I focused on the aspirational role of leaders and described why practical wisdom has become more important in today's world. I would like to leave you with the following points to take away for your organization:

1. Living in an aspirational period of history, leaders must meet the rising expectations of employees to treat them as individuals and to take their aspirations seriously.
2. Aspirations are not limited to economic expectations, they include projections of a better life. This means leaders must open the dialogue on aspirations to questions of personal meaning
3. Wisdom is now part of the leadership role, but it is not only dependent on experience and knowledge; it builds on foundations of humanity, listening and learning from others.
4. Beyond the foundations of wisdom, aspirational leaders need to be successful in meeting the aspirations in the company's development strategy and the aspirations of clients.



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<sup>1</sup> An example of the shift towards using wisdom as a leadership quality is given by Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi "The Wise Leader: how CEOs can learn practical wisdom to help them do what's right for their companies—and society" Harvard Business Review May 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle's definition appears in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.

<sup>3</sup> Practical wisdom for Confucius was not a question of succeeding in the world but of cultivating ethical virtues.

<sup>4</sup> The principles of humanism were formulated in 2002 at the 50th anniversary of World Humanist Congress website <http://www.iheu.org/adamdecl.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Vineet Nayar, chief executive HCL Technologies, by Adam Bryant. Published in the *New York Times*, 13 February 2010.