

**Being able to acknowledge our own mistakes and to draw lessons from them is the starting point of wisdom. It takes good intent, courage and vision to be wise – wise enough to take the kind of actions that lead to improvement and enduring good in our places of work, and in our homes and communities.**

The Random House College Dictionary describes wisdom as having knowledge of what is true or right, coupled with good judgment. In another dictionary I found wisdom to mean making correct use of knowledge. This made me think. I wondered what incorrect use of knowledge might be! And the answer was astonishing. It turns out that someone making incorrect use of knowledge is a fool!

Over two thousand years ago, a young man in his late teens had this intense desire to seek out the truth. He discovered that there was a man in his town he could go to in his search for wisdom. This wise old man was Socrates. The young man met the philosopher who took him for a walk to a nearby lake. On reaching the shore Socrates took this young man's hand in his and started walking into the water ever so slowly and continued moving gently till both of them were in waist high water. Socrates stopped, quietly placed his hand behind the young man's head and in a sudden motion, shoved the boy's head into the water and held it there. The seeker of wisdom was now in a state of shock. A thought raced through his mind that maybe he had made a mistake by coming to the old philosopher. Maybe the old man had gone mad. As the seconds ticked away, the lad struggled for breath, and Socrates in turn used more force to keep him down. A point came when the boy knew that the only way to survive was to put all his might and lunge out of Socrates' firm grip for a gasp of air. Using every bit of his strength he succeeded to pull himself out of danger. On recovering his breath and composure, he demanded to know why on earth did Socrates do this?! Socrates replied, "Young man, the day you pursue your goals with the force of passion and courage you displayed for catching one breath, is the day you will gain wisdom!"

This parable is simple, yet profound and contains several implications for corporate leaders whose aim it is to empower people. I have shared this parable of the young boy and Socrates with a countless number of managers in coaching and training sessions throughout the country to good effect. Late Brig Azhar Ansari (Retd), quoting a general he admired, said, "You cannot lead with the heart of a sparrow."

It would be interesting to learn how many people in top management positions today are graduates of reputable business schools and regularly read books on management. My guess

is the number would be small. The next question is: Who are being more effective, those with big degrees or the ones who have practical hands-on experience and are street smart? Invariably, one finds that those with greater wisdom are not necessarily the ones with better educational qualifications or degrees!

In essence, what makes managers effective and better than their counterparts is their ability in applied wisdom-*ie.*, knowing how to get people to work well with one another; knowing how to attract talent and get them to coach their successors; how to motivate people to do their best; how to get the whole organization strategically aligned and to act together on difficult issues. After all, management is about converting resources into results efficiently and effectively, and this goal can never be accomplished without people skills.

Look around you. Meet senior bureaucrats in government, top managers in companies and leading social activists in development. Notice a string of degrees some have under their names as proof of all the accumulated knowledge. What good is all this knowledge if it is not being put to correct and effective use? The more we know, the greater the chance of us acting as fools, if we fail to do what we know to be right. How many managers challenge status quo? How many directors speak up in board meetings and express views that go counter to that of the chairman's? Behind a lot of pomp and ceremony, when you look hard enough, you will find cowardice dressed up as expedience. Fear is the enemy of wisdom and turns knowledge workers into fools.

The phrase, 'In search of wisdom', can also be stated differently as, 'A desire to avoid foolishness'! Foolishness in Urdu means 'Jihaalat'. Sadly, in our society, people who are not literate are mostly termed "Jaahils", when, in fact, some may actually be quite wise! Knowledge is acquired through formal means *e.g.*, Universities, colleges, schools, madrassas; as well as through informal sources *e.g.*, self-study, observation, experience, elders etc. Experience, however, is the more relevant avenue of wisdom acquisition for those who reflect. The Quran emphasizes repeatedly, "There are signs for those who reflect."

Every day experiences carry immense value for us if only we develop the insight to find significance in the apparently mundane events of life and work. For example, the simple exercise of learning from one's own mistakes. The most important elements in our experience are the day-to-day routine mistakes we make. Being able to acknowledge our own mistakes; to draw lessons from them; and then to share this knowledge with others is the starting point of wisdom. It takes good intent, courage and vision to be wise – wise enough to take the kind of actions that lead to improvement and enduring good in our places of work, and in our homes and communities.

Learning from our own mistakes is fine. But to supplement this by learning from the mistakes of others is even better. Obaidullah Baig recently gave an inspiring talk on 'History' to over 200 young students and professionals at the Young Leaders' Conference organized in Karachi by the School of Leadership ([www.sol.edu.pk](http://www.sol.edu.pk)). Participants were spell bound for over an hour. His message was crisp and clear. According to him the study of history enriches us with the wisdom and experiences of colossal personalities who have ever lived. We learn of their thoughts, actions, and consequences of their actions. By caring to read the great figures of history, we can learn from their mistakes and their decisions and become even wiser.

Wisdom is like excellence – an ever moving target, the pursuit of which is in itself an admirable quality in people. Not to search for wisdom is to condemn our lives voluntarily to mediocrity and indeed to foolishness. Einstein reminds us by saying that no matter how much we know, our knowledge will always be limited. But with imagination, we can encircle the world.

But alas, what we often learn from history is that we don't learn from history!

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