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What do managers' know? Examining experienced managers' wisdom

Authors: Russell Warhurst and Kate Black

Address: Reader / Senior Lecturer, Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 8ST, UK

Contact email: r.warhurst@northumbria.ac.uk / kate.black@northumbria.ac.uk

Abstract

Purpose: *The paper critically examines the nature of managerial knowledge, highlights the limitations of formal managerial knowledge in informing managerial practice and demonstrates the role of alternative forms of knowledge, knowing and wisdom in informing the practice of a sample of middle-managers*

Design/Methodology/Approach: *The literature of managerial knowledge and wisdom is critically reviewed and seven components of wisdom are identified and discussed. Empirically, a qualitative research approach was adopted which involved visual-elicitation interviews focused on the nature of the work and learning of nineteen later-career middle-managers. Interviews were transcribed and an inductive, thematic, analysis of the data undertaken.*

Findings: *The findings show the incidence and types and extent of wisdom evident in the managers' accounts of their work. Extensive empirical evidence is interpreted in the light of an inductively derived analytical framework.*

Research Limitations/Implications: *Certain limitations of the research are acknowledged and practical suggestions developed for further research.*

Practical Implications: *Practical implications include the need for skepticism regarding the contributions of the corpus of formal management knowledge to managerial practice and the need to change the emphasis in manager development and education. Specific suggestions are developed for educational practices to cultivate wisdom.*

Originality / Value: *The paper consolidates disparate critiques of formal managerial knowledge, provides a useful analytical typology of managerial wisdom and presents sound evidence of the extent and nature of wisdom used in middle-managers' practice.*

Key words: *Managerial-wisdom; Managerial-knowledge; Learning-and-knowledge*

Introduction

The 2008 world economic crash, and subsequent hesitant recovery, has been largely attributed to an absence of managerial wisdom (Rowley and Gibbs 2008, Statler 2014). Subsequently, a major UK inquiry during 2014 into the future of management and leadership revealed concerns among two-thirds of surveyed employers that "a lack of leadership and management skills is holding back growth" (CMI 2014, p.16). Therefore, prevailing understandings of the nature of managers' knowledge and skills has begun to be challenged and it has been argued that "a different kind" of managerial leadership is required predicated on a different kind of knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi 2011, p.61).

The 2014 UK inquiry into the future of management and leadership suggested that managers were underqualified and called for more formal manager development. There would seem to be no shortage of management knowledge which could be supplied by such development, judging by the steady growth of management research journals and management texts and by the considerable interest in "knowledge management" using "big data" and analytics (Ihrig and MacMillan 2015). Moreover, the detailing of managers' work in terms of competence specifications suggests a precision such that Statler (2014) noted that the "normative, practical knowledge" of management had been eclipsed by "value-free, scientific knowledge" (p.398).

However, critiques of the contributions of formal knowledge to occupational practice are long-standing. For example, Lave and Wenger (1991, p.108) noted that while such technical, scientific, knowledge had "exchange value" its "use value" might be quite limited. Mintzberg and Gosling's (2006, p.419) widely cited critique of management education drew attention to the fact that much formal management knowledge amounted to "abstractions and

generalisations out of context" and had "little practical utility" (see also Mintzberg 2004, Pfeffer and Fong 2002). More recently, the contribution of formal knowledge to managers' practice has been questioned in leading management development journals. Thus, in a *Journal of Management Development* editorial in 2012 Lenssen *et al.* commented on the need "to ask ourselves … how do we bring wisdom back into management education" (p.879). Similarly, in the journal *Management Learning* in 2014 Nonaka *et al.* noted the "absence as much as the presence of knowledge" (p.366) in real world management decision-making. In particular, the dualism of theory and practice and the inability of the former to transfer to the latter have been highlighted as particular weaknesses (Statler 2014). Thus, it has been suggested that "more than knowledge" (McKenna and Rooney 2009, p.447) is needed in management, with many researchers arguing for wisdom to be given more recognition in management practice and education (Gosling and Mintzberg 2006, Rowley 2006, Rowley and Gibbs 2008).

As will be seen, a significant theoretical literature examining wisdom has emerged in recent years and a specific literature dealing with the "practical wisdom" of management has developed such that "wisdom has begun to enjoy a revival as a subject of scholarly concern" (Nonaka *et al.* 2014, p.367). However, there have been calls for more empirical research to evidence wisdom in practice. Thus, for example, Rowley (2006, p.1248) noted that wisdom was under-researched and "scarce" in the management literature and McKenna and Rooney (2009) suggested that "managerial wisdom research is in its early days" (p.449). More generally, Maxwell (2013) has called for "more knowledge and understanding about the nature of wisdom" and Rennstam and Ashcraft (2014) called for "sensitive" and "grounded" inquiry into "how knowledge unfolds in various lines of work" (p.16). The key contribution

of this paper lies in responding to such calls and providing evidence of wisdom at work in management.

Such an examination of wisdom in managers' practice has significant implications for manager development as it is well established that the nature of the knowledge of practice predicates the efficacy of development methods (Warhurst 2006). Thus, an occupation underpinned by propositional, scientific knowledge is likely to be most effectively developed by formal training and education. By contrast, an occupation drawing upon personal, practice knowledge, such as management, might best be developed through informal, workplace-based learning (Eraut 2000) and the "imparting of knowledge in the classroom" might make little contribution to managers' practice (Kessler and Bailey 2007, p.lvi).

The aim of this paper is to provide support for management development by empirically examining the nature of experienced managers' practice to ascertain the significance of wisdom in this practice. Experienced managers provide the focus for the study based on the established evidence that wisdom is developed through occupational and life experiences, becoming particularly apparent in individuals aged over fifty (Eraut *et al*. 1995, Sternberg 2005). Experienced managers thus represent an exemplifying occupation with considerable potential for examining the phenomenon of occupational wisdom. The specific research question has been to discover 'what is the extent and nature of the wisdom evident in experienced managers' accounts of their work?'. In answering this research question the paper will address three objectives. Firstly, the literatures of wisdom will be overviewed and the meanings of managerial wisdom will be analysed. Secondly, the extent and types of wisdom evident in experienced middle managers' accounts of their practice will be examined.

Finally, conclusions will be drawn regarding the wisdom of managers and offered as a basis for enhancing manager development.

Theoretical Base

Blackler (1995) noted the complex and problematic nature of managerial and organizational knowledge. However, it has been argued that typically the knowledge base of management is unquestioned by vocational educators. Eraut (1994) thus noted that knowledge which could be conveyed through courses and text-books was regarded as the "proper" knowledge of occupations. This type of knowledge is labeled in various ways such as, "codified", "public" or "propositional" knowledge (Eraut 2000, p.113) and "abstract", "embrained" or "encoded" knowledge (Blackler 1995, p.1025). More commonly occurring terms describing essentially the same knowledge type include 'knowing that' or, simply, 'formal' knowledge. The characteristics of knowledge labeled in these ways, includes being "specialized, firmly bounded, scientific and standardized" (Eraut 1994), "free-standing, decontextualized and individualized" (Engestrom 1996, p.199) and "subject to quality control by editors, peer review and debate" (Eraut 2000, p.114). Such knowledge is that which is capable of being "banked" (Gherardi *et al.* 1998, p.295) and is, as Lave (1997) noted, a product rather than a process, being knowledge "of practice" rather than knowledge "for practice" (p.29). Although the contribution of such knowledge to occupational practice is now contested, in certain circumstances, such knowledge might be "knowledge for practice". For example, Claxton (1997) pointed to the uses of such knowledge where, for example, tasks can be undertaken in formulaic ways and where there is a reasonable degree of predictability in the work.

However, an increasing "knowledge skepticism" (Rennstam and Ashcraft, 2014, p.5) has prompted critical examinations of the knowledge underpinning occupational practice and raised awareness of the value of alternative knowledge types. In the specific domain of management, Blackler's (1995) and Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) typologies of knowledge are particularly well cited. Blacker (1995) for instance, identified "at least five images of knowledge" in the literature, "knowledge that is embrained, embodied, encultured, embedded and encoded" (p.1023). Most recently, there has been considerable interest in "practical wisdom", a form of knowing which is related to but distinct from knowledge *per se*. It is suggested that such practical wisdom, more than knowledge, is a prerequisite for effective management and leadership (Nonaka and Takeuchi 2011, Weick 2007).

Wisdom is explored within diverse literatures (Rowley 2006) such as those of religions or belief systems, philosophy and, more recently, psychology with this latter having come to dominate the field (Small 2004). Considerable empirical work has been undertaken from the perspective of the latter discipline. Studies have, for example, collected individuals conceptions of the term, presented individuals with hypothetical life-dilemmas to respond to and asked participants to nominate wise people (see for example, Baltes *et al.* 1995, Gluck *et al.* 2005, Sternberg 2005).

However, just defining wisdom remains a key activity in its study and is made all the harder because of the ancient, privileged and thereby protected, nature of the concept. Kessler and Bailey (2007) thus noted that "there are as many dictionary definitions of wisdom as there are dictionaries" (xviii). However, numerous scholars have reviewed the literatures, provided generic definitions and developed structural typologies (see for example, Baltes *et al.* 1995,

Cathcart and Greenspan 2013, Gibson 2008, Gluck *et al.* 2005; Kessler and Bailey 2007; Maxwell 2013, Mele 2010, Nonaka and Takeuchi 2011, Rowland and Slack 2009, Rowley 2006, Small 2004, Sternberg 2005). Despite these extensive efforts, in the management domain at least, Nonaka *et al.* (2014) have recently reflected on "wrestling with the elusiveness of wisdom" (p.375) and Kessler and Bailey (2007) asserted, "wisdom is among the most profound and complex concepts in our vernacular" (xv).

Nonetheless, Gluck *et al.* (2005) found that despite the diversity, "the overall definition of wisdom … is somewhat consistent across studies" (p.198). From the current authors' meta-review of the literatures, eight analytically distinct attributes of wisdom can be discerned and have potential for better understanding, and developing, managerial practice at the individual level. The order in which these attributes are considered in what follows mirrors the proportion of attention given to each attribute in the literature.

The first, and most cited, attribute of wisdom is that wisdom is predicated on a knowledge base but involves the judicious, or "true", application of knowledge. Wisdom is action-orientated. Rennstam and Ashcraft (2014) thus noted a "shift" in understanding knowing in organizations "from noun to verb, something that people do rather than something that people have" (p.5). Using Ryle's famous distinction, Maxwell (2013) proposed that in wisdom "'knowing how' is more fundamental than 'knowing that' and drawing upon Sternberg's seminal studies of wisdom, Small (2004) concluded that the "essence" of wisdom was not what was known but, rather, "the manner in which knowledge was held and put to use" (p.754). A second, and related, attribute of wisdom concerns the purposes for which knowledge is used. Mele (2010) characterized wisdom as involving the "integration of ethics

into decision making" (p.638) and Nonaka and Takeuchi (2011) argued that wise leaders "practice moral discernment about what is good" making judgments "guided by the individual's values and ethics" (p. 61-62, see also Statler 2014). Therefore, the wise do not simply know what to do but whether or not things should be done.

A third commonly occurring attribute of wisdom is the process of prudent judgment, a process associated with an intuitive sense of what will work and why (Antonacopoulou 2010). Nonaka and Takeuchi (2011) thus noted that a characteristic of wise leaders was their ability to "grasp things intuitively" (p.63-64). A related attribute of wisdom is the adoption of broader perspectives. It is argued that the wise are capable of "seeing and considering all points of view" (Rowley 2006, p.1248), taking the "long view" (Rowley, 2006b, p. 259) and seeing the bigger picture through "expanding particulars into universals" (Nonaka and Takeuchi 2011, p.63). Wise leaders are therefore depicted as those who are capable of seeing systems and interconnections, of integrating across boundaries (Mackay *et al.* 2014) and of making sound strategic assessments (Kessler and Bailey 2007). In seeing systems, the wise understand political positions and demonstrate political judgment (Nonaka *et al.* 2014).

A fifth commonly identified attribute of wisdom is that "wisdom goes hand in hand with increasing doubt and uncertainty" (Sternberg 2005, p.9). The wise accept that much is uncertain, unknown and possibly unknowable. The wise demonstrate humility (McKenna and Rooney 2009) and acknowledge the limits of their knowledge, adopting what Statler (2014) referred to as "a beginner's mind" (p.412). In sum, Nonaka *et al.* (2014) stated that, "to be wise is to be learned about our ignorance" (p.366). However, as a counterpoint to this sense of ignorance, it is widely noted that the wise are attentively mindful, constantly learning and

sensemaking through sustained introspection and "self-reflection" on their own and others' experiences (Rowley 2006b, p.260).

The wise recognize that learning is not usually a solitary activity, and thus a sixth commonly cited attribute of wisdom is the quality of recognizing and working through networks of interdependencies. It is noted that the wise demonstrate emotional intelligence, having good self-knowledge and sensitivity to others (McKenna and Rooney 2009). In short, the wise "understand people", their goals, values and interests (Sternberg 2005, p.8). Through such understanding comes a "heightened sensitivity to local situations" (Chia 2005, p.1091) with the wise recognizing uniqueness and context-dependence. Solutions are, thereby, seen not as universal but as specific and practical knowledge and wisdom are understood not as individual possessions but as socially situated and sustained resources (Baltes *et al.* 1995). A related, seventh, attribute of wisdom is that the wise are able to engender creative solutions to problems (Matthews 1998, Rowley 2006b). In particular, the wise are able to re-frame problems for themselves and others to facilitate solutions (Sternberg 2005).

Finally, it is widely noted that wisdom is associated with "dealing with the fundamental matters of the human condition" (Baltes *et al.* 1995, p.158) such that the wise demonstrate a capacity to "live a fulfilled and worthwhile life as a whole" (Mele 2010, p. 641) and to assist others to "realize what is of value in life" (Maxwell 2013b, p.93).

However, wisdom is not a panacea in managers' practice and the limits of wisdom are examined in the literature. Referring to the more general concept of personal knowledge, Blackler (1995) noted the "limitations" as "partial, constructed and pragmatic" (p.1034) and

Sternberg (2005) found that in contemporary society wisdom in particular "may become out of date" (p.18). Effective managerial practice is likely, therefore, to require the interplay of formal knowledge with wisdom. Nonetheless, it can be concluded that in the case of management work, wisdom, as analysed within this review, is likely to be the key differentiator of managerial performance. Thus, most of the "ten characteristics of a highly effective C21 manager and leader" identified by the 2014 UK Commission's report into the future of management and leadership, align with the attributes of wisdom identified above.

Research methodology

The empirical findings that form the core of this paper derive from an in-depth, qualitative study into the practice and learning of experienced managers in the second half of their managerial careers. Subsequent to institutional ethical approval, participants were purposefully recruited from experienced managers who had graduated from a university's MBA programme during the preceding six years. All graduates from the programme who met the criteria of having ten or more years of management experience and who were over the age of 45 years were approached to participate in the study and were informed that the research was designed to examine management practice and learning among managers in the second-half of their careers. Of the total of sixty-two graduates approached, twenty-two agreed to participate in the study and a full data-set was collected from nineteen. Virtually all participants were in middle-management roles with non-routine operational and also strategic responsibilities, slightly more than half were employed by public sector organizations and slightly less than half were women. All participants worked for high value-adding organizations such as professional services firms, local-government departments, health-care services and high-tech design and manufacturing firms, that is, participants worked in knowledge intense workplaces.

Earlier knowledge researchers had reported difficulties in discovering professionals knowledge-in-use as a result of the tacit qualities of such knowledge (see for example, Eraut 2000). Therefore, a range of visual-elicitation techniques were used such as requesting participants to produce a pictor depicting how they perceived themselves as a manager. In-depth interviews then followed with the participants simply being asked to talk through the visuals. The researchers had developed an interview guide of eight open questions. However, this interview guide proved unnecessary, with the visuals prompting extensive and typically deeply reflexive narratives. Accounts were invariably broad ranging and covered the nature of the managers' work, recent career moves and personal development.

Analysis focused on the interview transcripts. Codes were induced from the manager-participants' discourses and deliberate attempts were made to suspend theoretical or conceptual understanding at this primary stage of coding. To enhance the reliability and validity of coding the two researchers induced codes independently from a sample of transcripts, applied these codes to segments of narrative within the sample and then compared and contrasted each others' codes and coding. Through jointly examining the potential meaning of the narratives, codes were revised and the application of these revised codes enabled the analysis to be refined. Thornborrow and Brown (2009) noted how the accepted approach in qualitative analysis is to "circle back and forth between data and concepts using a multi-stage inductive approach" (p.361). This approach was adopted in the current research and a subsequent second level of coding involved the formulation of codes informed by the literatures that were reviewed earlier. Through constant comparison, related codes were then grouped together and refined, encompassing, theme-codes were formulated. A list of over 60 descriptive codes emerged and these coded segments of narrative revealing the wisdom within

the manager-participants' accounts of their practice. These codes were then organised within the higher-level analytical theme-codes which are used to present the findings below.

Careful attention was given to ensuring that contemporary qualitative research standards were met (see for example Rocco 2010, Tracey 2012). For example, to ensure the credibility of the emerging findings the researchers sought both contrary evidence and examined the extent of coding. With regard to this latter point, most of the specific findings presented below were evident in at least half of the participants' accounts. That "data saturation" was evident, whereby no new codes were emerging and that established codes were effectively coding all of the relevant data gives further credence to the findings. Moreover, in establishing the credibility of their findings, qualitative researchers openly acknowledge their own influence on the particular data-set that is generated and readily write themselves into research story. In this case, both researchers were known to the participants having been tutors on the MBA degree that all had completed. However, the researchers' critical reflections on their potential influence on the data have led to the conclusion that any influence was minimal. None of the participants were still MBA delegates at the time of the interviews and all were in considerably more senior positions than the researchers themselves.

While qualitative inquiry cannot make claims to generalisability, to ensure the relevance of the research to other settings, the researchers have, again, followed accepted standards for contemporary qualitative inquiry such as providing a good level of contextual detail and reflexively highlighting the limitations of the conclusions.

The findings presented below which reveal both extent and complexity of wisdom within the participants' practice have particular credence as the participants were asked simply to provide accounts of their recent careers and the nature of their work and learning. At no stage were participants asked directly to reflect on the knowledge or wisdom embedded within their work. That considerable evidence of managerial wisdom was induced from the data, as is evidenced in the findings that now follow, rather than being purposefully sought, gives weight to the significance of wisdom in managerial work.

Findings

As discussed, the contribution of formal knowledge to occupational practice has been increasingly questioned. An awareness of the limited contribution of formal management knowledge to the practice of management was evident in a number of the participants' accounts with references being made to a "*theory – practice gap*". That management was believed to more of an "*art form*" than a science was evident in the accounts of nearly half the participants and several referred directly to the "wisdom" deriving from experience as being the key to successful management. Thus, a senior regional economic-development manager reflected:

> "*As you get older you get wiser, you see things that others don't*".

Nearly two-thirds of the participants noted that the knowledge or wisdom underpinning their practice was intangible and hard to communicate such that it could only be developed and not taught. A manufacturing manager was typical in stating that;

> "*A lot of the knowledge you need in this job, you just can't get from a book*".

A business development manager in the health-care insurance industry noted quite simply;

"*I have had to learn the hard way*".

In examining the manager-participants' narratives, the extent and nature of the wisdom underlying their managerial work became clear. In figure 1 the various attributes of wisdom that were evident in the data are shown. The relative size of the circles depicts the approximate number of participants evidencing each attribute and the shading of each circle reflects the extent of evidence of that attribute. For example, a large, lightly shaded circle depicts an attribute that was evident in the narratives of most participants but was an attribute about which, on average, only a limited amount was said. By contrast, a smaller but densely shaded circle indicates an attribute that was evidenced by fewer participants, but those few participants' accounts provide much detailed evidence of the particular attribute of wisdom.
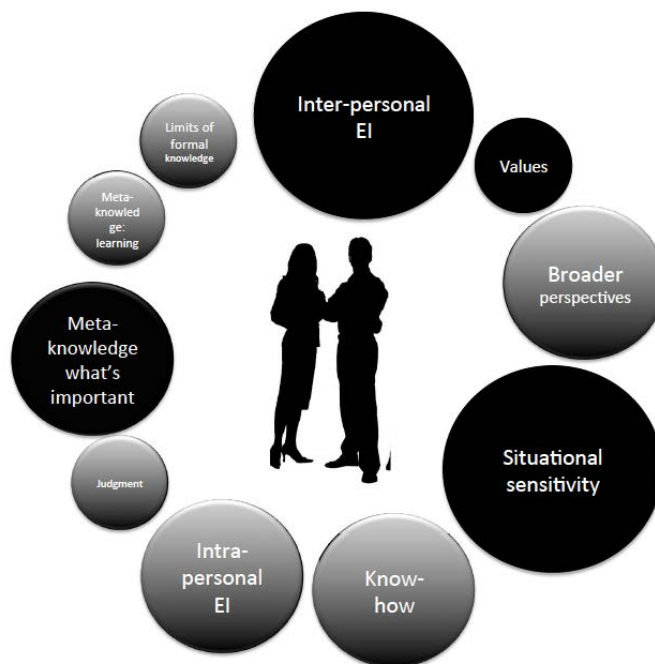

Figure 1: Attributes of wisdom evident within the data

The attribute of wisdom that was discussed earlier as "know-how" was clearly discerned in the narratives of over half the participants and these narratives provided considerable evidence of this attribute. One participant specifically remarked on the "*sterility*" of knowledge without application to management problems and an orientation to action was evident in the accounts of many more. A participant encapsulated the views of many in asserting with a sense of pride;

> "*I like making things happen in difficult circumstances, I like to be challenged … [my view is] 'just do it': do what needs to be done*".

A further facet of this attribute of wisdom which was strongly evident was, in the words of one manager, the "*tricks of the trade*" and, in the words of another, "*work-arounds*" for cumbersome formal procedures. A senior housing manager echoed a theme in many narratives in noting how he would typically;

> "*Work around the chain of command: it's the best way to get things done*".

A related manifestation of wisdom evident in over half of the narratives was that action was informed by intuition, that is, a process whereby as one participant expressed it, "*you just recognise it*". A local-government manager explained how his decision-making could be constrained by labyrinthine procedures. However, this manager "*simply knew*" when it was safe to "*adjust the scores*" to achieve a desired outcome. A project-manager in a public-private partnership shared-services provider was typical in reporting how her intuition resulted in quick and "*invariably accurate*" judgments in the following account of meeting a new manager;

> "*I shook his hand and said to myself straightaway, 'he's useless'. It was the complete lack of enthusiasm and interest*".

Through such intuition, five participants' narratives clearly evidence experience providing them with sensitivity to pending problems. An IT manager was thus critical of a project being managed by more senior, but less experienced, manager;

> "*How could they not have known that this* [disaster] *was going to happen?*"

A second attribute of wisdom examined earlier in the literature review, values and ethics informing decision making, could be discerned in the narratives of eight participants and was invariably expressed strongly and at length. A manager in the petrochemical industry reflected on how his personal values of fairness and justice had been compromised. The manager reflected that he *"had become a monster in that job"* and felt "*ashamed*" by some of the actions he had felt coerced to take. Another values-driven manager had been more able to talk-back to his seniors and defend his team in the face of cuts such that he could now "*sleep well at night*". For many participants, personal values acted as guiding principles informing their actions. For instance, although the manager-participants were usually at least one organisational level removed from personal interaction with clients or customers, a concern for ensuring high standards and excellence of service or product was pervasive. A director of a payroll services company, for instance, asserted;

> "*We can never lose sight of why we are really here. It's not just about the bottom-line, it's about ensuring our clients get the systems-support they need as and when they need it*".

A related attribute of wisdom was evident in the participants' judicious approaches to decision making. Participants' narratives show that experiences provided them with a high

level of sensitivity to the potential risks and dangers in situations. One participant thus observed;

"*You notice if there are things that are not quite right*".

Similarly, an operations manager in a high-tech manufacturing firm encapsulated the caution that was evident in many accounts;

"*Something always goes wrong, it just does: it's life*".

As a result, participants seemed to take their time in making decisions;

"*Maybe a year went by with me having this churning around in my head*".

Nonetheless, many of the same participants were not averse to taking calculated risks and experimenting in ways that limited the exposure of themselves and their teams. A financial services manager remarked;

"*I was prepared to give it a go, taking a sort of trial and error approach, experimenting*".

A local-government manager with a regeneration brief observed that;

"*I had seen all this before when I was in leisure-services, I knew that the policy contained dangers for us but we could hedge the risks and get that retail-park off the ground*".

Such approaches were complemented by a related attribute of wisdom that was widely and strongly evidenced, an ability to take a longer view and to see interconnections and systemic interdependencies. A local-government manager remarked on her ability to adopt a "*helicopter view*" and a manager in the petro-chemicals industry was critical of colleagues who had spent all their careers in the same industry;

> "*They only know the ways of this company and this company is, quite frankly, decades behind*".

Being able to see interconnections and interdependencies was widely evident with participants being able, for instance, to "*see consequences*" and to "*recognise downstream and upstream impacts*".

However, there was plenty of evidence of an associated attribute of wisdom, accepting uncertainty and sailing calmly through turbulent seas. A regeneration manager reflected that because she had amassed, and could fall back on, "*a plethora of tools and mechanisms*", she was able to accept that;

> "*No man can step in the same river twice*".

An employment-relations manager told of how in making his most recent career move he had accepted that his contribution in his previous role had come to an end and although the new job he was being offered was potentially "*a can of worms*", nonetheless;

> "*It was something different, so I just took the job*".

Participants' narratives evidenced strong intra-personal capabilities that are associated with wisdom. Thus self-awareness figured strongly and a majority of participants readily accepted the limits of their own knowledge. One fairly senior manager-participant was not untypical in worrying;

> "*Maybe I am one of the crayon-eaters at the back of the class*".

A similar feeling was expressed by an IT manager in his comment;

> "*I'm living my managerial life backwards. I started knowing everything and I've ended up knowing so little*".

Most managers had come to terms with their limitations. A local government manager thus reflected that she had learned to live with the fact that in many situations she; "*didn't know what I didn't know*". This manager continued, noting that she had come to recognise;

> "*The need for me not to be in control of everything*".

Participants acknowledged their propensity to make mistakes and generally spoke of the need to "*live with but learn from*" the consequences. A production manager was typical in reflecting;

> "*One of my biggest mistakes was bringing in experts and then not taking any notice of them because we thought we knew best … if you don't make mistakes you don't learn anything [*but*] if you don't learn from your mistakes, you are in real trouble in management*".

Alongside this acceptance of mistakes, the managers clearly evidenced resilience, which was succinctly expressed by the assertion that;

> "*You come to accept that not everything will be a breeze … you just crack-on and see how it goes*".

Many participants evidenced pride in such staying power, noting, for instance, that as a result of years of persistence,

> "*I'm now the wise-owl*" and "*I'm now seen as the commissioning guru*".

Such widely evident intra-personal wisdom was mirrored by extensive evidence of inter-personal wisdom. Certain participants were critical of management colleagues who failed to value people and assertions of the value of people pepper every account. A civil-service manager reflected the opinions of many in asserting that the essence of management was;

> *"Essentially about helping people and bringing people along"*.

Two thirds of the participants' narratives evidence a considerable effort going into developing empathy with staff, for understand differences of personality, perspective, culture, reactions to change and motivation. A local government manager reflected on the need to recognise individual differences and work with different individuals in different ways;

> *"They are not a string of sausages: all the same"*.

Closely associated with this sensitivity, there was considerable evidence of efforts to build and sustain high trust collaborative relationships with both staff and external stakeholders. Many accounts thus reveal the importance of interdependency and synergy with the managers purposefully interconnecting into various networks. The participants generally seemed to know who the "*right people*" were to cultivate connections with within and beyond the organisation and a local-government manager was typical in concluding a story noting;

> *"Personal relationships and networks make managing so much easier"*.

Through their awareness of the importance of social networks and workplace relationships participant-managers evidenced considerable situational sensitivity and an awareness of the limitations of standard solutions was pervasive. Overwhelmingly, the managers saw connections between their past experience and current and future challenges while being highly aware that previous solutions could not simply be transferred. A HR manager was typical in valuing his experience but in rejecting a formulaic re-application of tried and tested solutions. This manager told of how;

> *"What I have learnt from other organisations has merely shaped my thinking and solutions cannot simply be dropped into place from elsewhere"*.

While, as noted earlier, the managers' accounts reveal an ability to see the bigger picture, wisdom was also demonstrated through a high degree of sensitivity to the details and complexities of situations and to contrasting cultures between organisations. It was widely recognised that there was, as a not-for-profit manager noted, a need to "*understand the specifics of the business*" and appreciate when situations represented "*a totally different ball game*". Another manager was typical in concluding that "*patience*" was a key virtue in management as;

> "*There's no perfect recipe, you just have pay careful attention to the detail and to adapt*".

A wide range of participants seemed particularly sensitive to political facets of their contexts including the gendered nature of power. For instance, an IT manager remarked;

> "*In any new situation now I learn very quickly who's got the biggest stick and that might not be the person with the biggest office*".

A female manager, newly appointed to a social-care commissioning role reflected on a constraint on her decision-making;

> "*The men here stick together*".

The participants did, though, demonstrate adeptness at working within politics such that one manager noted taking up new responsibilities in a loss making but high profile local-government department;

> "*I had to be very careful the way I played that game … there were so many toes that could have inadvertently been stepped on*".

A private sector manager demonstrated comparable political dexterity;

> *"You have to position your questions politically here. You can't ask why the king has no clothes".*

In working within the subtle structures of power and politics, wisdom was evident in the way the managers appeared to avoid command and control approaches but, rather, worked though "*collaboration*", "*influence*" and "*softer routes*" in achieving outcomes. A production manager thus remarked;

> *"If colleagues are not engaged and brought in then you might as well forget it".*

A final attribute of wisdom strongly evident in the managers' narratives was a form of meta-knowledge comprising facets such as an understanding of what's important in work and life and of the significance of continuous learning to human flourishing. A foundation for such wisdom was the managers' overwhelming acceptance that change was the norm in work and life. For instance, a participant in petro-chemicals noted;

> *"I suppose the only constant through my career has been change … everything has always been in a state of flux".*

A related facet was a widespread ability to step-back and take a holistic perspective on their lives by appraising the balance between work and leisure. A HR manager reflected on how a particular role "*was killing me*" which had led him to reduce his work hours. A not-for-profit manager similarly reflected with sagacity;

> *"I slapped myself and said to myself, 'Sue you are not in competition with anyone any more, so stop it'".*

However, although the managers were typically in the latter stages of their careers, they were not abandoning their commitment to managerial work. A production manager was typical in reflecting on the essence of managerial work;

"*It's about being here, spending time, knowing the detail but seeing the wood from the trees*".

Finally, a commitment to continuous learning was widely evident. One participant specifically noted the limitations of "*accumulated knowledge and wisdom*" in his evolving context. Another participant was typical in her comment;

"*There's literally new stuff everyday in this role. Literally every day*".

More generally, the narratives reveal instances of learning from others and from critical self-reflection on experience, an attitude captured by the observation;

"*You can't just roll out the same old answer … if you don't keep learning you will be master of a world that no longer exists*".

The managers evidenced openness to learning from others, from staff, colleagues, senior managers and stakeholders and from reflection on their own experiences. The following realisation demonstrates the general willingness to learn from others;

"*I have come to realise that I don't have to be the font of all wisdom, to have all the answers, rather, I need to draw on the capabilities of others around me*".

The ability to learn from personal reflection, which was equally widely evident, is captured in one participant's honest observation;

"*Earlier in my career I wasn't particularly reflective, I was just running from one challenge to the next so I didn't look back at what I could have done better*".

Setting an agenda for his future learning, another participant reflected;

"*Perhaps I haven't exposed myself enough yet to the key decision-makers*".

Interpretation and conclusions

At the outset of this article the findings of the 2014 UK *Inquiry into Future of Management and Leadership* were noted. This *Inquiry* highlighted a lack of leadership and management skills and, echoing the work of scholars of managerial knowledge such as Nonaka and Takeuchi (2011), the *Inquiry* asserted the need for different types of leaders with "new capabilities". It was shown that despite the growth in formal management knowledge and its dissemination through manager education and development, "knowledge skepticism" (Rennstam and Ashcraft 2014, p.4) had emerged and critiques of the 'proper' knowledge of professions (Eraut 1994) such as management were proliferating. In response, scholars have argued for a reappraisal of the knowledge inculcated through education and development. For example, a *Journal of Management Development* editorial in 2012 proposed the need to bring wisdom into management education. However, as was shown, while commentaries on the nature of wisdom are extensive, scholars have identified a gap in empirical examinations of the nature of wisdom particularly the wisdom in managerial practice. Therefore, the research question addressed in this article has been; what is the extent and nature of the wisdom evident in experienced managers' accounts of their work?

Although the complexities of defining wisdom were noted, an analysis of the literatures enabled the identification of seven frequently cited attributes of managerial wisdom. These attributes were considered in order according to their prominence in the literatures. While this analysis of managerial wisdom distilled from the literatures was not tested on the data, it informed, in the manner discussed, the later stages of data analysis. Initial inductive analysis of the managers' accounts of their practice resulted in the emergence of the specific attributes of managerial knowing that could, on the basis of the earlier analysis of the literatures, be readily be understood in terms of wisdom. These attributes were depicted in figure 1. Each

of these attributes was evidenced in detail in the findings section. These findings serve to empirically confirm the significance of the theorized attributes of wisdom although it can be concluded that the extent and weight of evidence of the attributes was somewhat different from the emphasis in the literatures and this is reflected in the order in which the attributes are considered in what follows.

The managers were all, as was described, MBA educated and therefore it can be assumed that they were all in possession of an extensive repertoire of formal management knowledge. However, the limited utility of formal knowledge for managerial practice was directly asserted. By contrast, the wisdom within their managerial practice was obvious. This wisdom can typically be seen either to oppose descriptions and prescriptions arising from the corpus of formal managerial knowledge or to complete significant gaps within this corpus. Thus, for instance, while decision making theory gives attention to the balance of power among stakeholders, the sort of micro and gender politics that participants in our case dealt with in achieving managerial action, rarely features (Crowder 2014).

Based on both the extent and weight of evidence, five attributes of wisdom appeared to be particularly significant in informing the managers' practice. Firstly, and most significantly, an inter-personal attribute of wisdom resulted in the prioritising of people over processes with empathy and understanding of diversity resulting in cynicism for uniform or simplistic prescriptions. There was, therefore, a ready acceptance of interdependency and an awareness of the need to build trust so that results could be achieved through collaborative effort.

Secondly, while past-experiences were understood as having relevance to current problems, the formulaic application of experience was rejected and its limitations readily acknowledged. In particular there was awareness of the specific power balance within organisations. This political awareness resulted in the careful positioning of solutions and the use of indirect and softer routes to achieving outcomes even where direct, command and control, style approaches might have been feasible given the typical seniority of the manager concerned.

Thirdly, an attribute of wisdom that was labelled meta-knowledge gave participants a holistic perspective. In particular there was an acceptance of the inevitability of change and that the future would be different to the past was embraced. Such acceptance was supported by humility and a recognition of the limits of personal knowledge, of the vastness of what was still to be mastered and therefore of the need for continuous learning. However, there was concern to achieve work-life balance and an avoidance of the colonisation of the self by the managerial role (Costas and Grey 2014).

Fourthly, a related attribute of wisdom, intra-personal intelligence, ensured that arrogance was avoided, indeed, self-doubt was quite prevalent, but that quiet confidence was built. Therefore, mistakes were accepted as an inevitable accompaniment to managing, but lessons were learnt, mistake were let go and resilience built. Fifthly, a longer-term perspective was adopted. Interconnections were seen and systemic interdependencies perceived. There was thus a consciousness of the distant and sometimes attenuated consequences of present actions such that decisions were made judiciously and typically grounded in personal values.

Finally, as was seen, other attributes of wisdom, such as values driven decision-making were readily apparent in the practice of many of the managers. In sum, that all the participant managers in the research had considerable experience and could therefore be regarded as successful managers, this study adds to our understanding of the importance and nature of wisdom in effective managerial action.

Limitations and Implications

Certain limitations of the research require recognition before the implications for policy and practice can be asserted. Firstly, the research presented here has been small-scale and exploratory. Therefore, while the findings might, as discussed, have wider relevance, these findings cannot simply be extrapolated to other cases. Secondly, narratives were not analysed to reveal instances of forms of knowledge and knowing other than wisdom and therefore, an analysis of proportionate contributions of contrasting knowledge types cannot be attempted. Finally, in research of this nature, the researchers are inevitably implicated in the inquiry and manager-participants might have purposively constructed favourable images of themselves. However, with regard to this latter limitation, and to reiterate the earlier discussion, a particular strength of the current research lies in the fact that the findings of the extent and depth of wisdom demonstrated by the experienced managers was totally unprompted. As was discussed, the researchers were not investigating managers' knowledge and wisdom at the outset.

Future research might address the second of the noted limitations by, for example, using the results of the current research to systematically examine knowledge in use in managerial work. Managers might, for example, be asked to identify critical instances in their practice which

tap knowledge reserves and then be asked to explore these using a prompts listing the types of knowledge and wisdom such as those uncovered in the current research. Alternatively, managers might be presented with descriptions of particular attributes of wisdom and requested to provide examples from their own practice.

Nonetheless, practical implications for manager education are supported by the conclusions drawn above from the current inquiry. Importantly, as Antonacopoulou (2010) suggested, there is a need to question standard approaches to manager education that emphasise the transmission of established propositional knowledge and the development of standard cognitive techniques. Mackay *et al.* (2014) argued that "tightening our conceptual grasp" (p.433) has failed to equip managers to deal with contemporary organisational challenges. Similarly, Nonaka *et al.* (2014) draw upon Ghoshal's influential work in highlighting the "baleful effects of the 'scientific' forms of knowledge regularly peddled in business schools" (p.372). Gosling and Mintzberg (2006) famously summed up the problem of "today's management education" as being "not a deficiency but a surfeit of teaching" (p.421). It has thus been argued that manager education should include "courses in managerial wisdom" (Small 2004, p.753). As Kessler and Bailey (2007) argued, "if not trained in wisdom; wisdom cannot be expected" (p.xxxi).

However, there has been debate as to whether or not wisdom can be taught or even whether its development can be facilitated (Statler 2014). Manager educators and developers have, though, risen to the challenge and various pedagogies are emerging to foster the development of wisdom within formal manager development programmes. A number of high profile manager education programmes are cited as exemplars in developing key facets of wisdom.

Evaluation studies of these programmes tend, though, to be conducted by the programme designers themselves (see for example, Antonacopoulou 2010, Hay and Hodkinson 2008, Mintzberg, 2004, Statler, 2014). Nonetheless, the conclusions that have been drawn from the current research suggest that certain pedagogies characterizing these programmes may contribute to developing facets of wisdom. Firstly, manager development might cultivate an awareness of the uses but also the limitations for formal knowledge, thereby acknowledging and giving status to alternative knowledge forms. Secondly, the trajectory in contemporary manager development towards critical engagement with practice is supported. As Statler (2014) noted, "learning about business should be conceptualized as integral to the practice of business" (p.402). Thirdly, techniques of critical reflection and personal reflexivity (Antonacopoulou 2010, Gosling and Mintzberg 2006) combined with challenging "Socratic dialogue" (Statler 2014, p.411) are likely to cultivate key facets of wisdom such as self-awareness and the adoption of broader perspectives. Finally, reflecting the socially constructed nature of wisdom, group-based manager development my prove to be more effective than the individualized forms of development such as coaching which have come to the fore in recent years. Cathcart and Greenspan (2013) thus noted that wisdom development could be "hastened" when undertaken as a joint enterprise (p.969).

In summary, this article has provided some further insights into exactly what experienced managers know. It has been confirmed that management is "an art not a science" (Chia 2005, p.1092) and attributes of wisdom are widespread. The challenge now is for manager developers and educationalists to develop wisdom among less experienced managers and to ensure that wisdom is more widely acknowledged and disseminated in organisations.

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