

## Leadership and wisdom

~ Ph. D. Professor **Sorin-George Toma** (Faculty of Business and Administration, University of Bucharest, Romania)

E-mail: tomagsorin62@yahoo.com

~ Ph. D. **Ștefan Catană** (Faculty of Business and Administration, University of Bucharest, Romania)

E-mail: catana.stefan90@yahoo.com

~ Ph. D. Lecturer **Cătălin Grădinaru** (Faculty of Business and Administration, University of Bucharest, Romania)

E-mail: catalin.gradinaru@faa.unibuc.ro

~ Ph. D. Student **Loredana Nicoleta Zainea** (Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania)

E-mail: loredananicoleta.zainea@gmail.com

**Abstract:** The history of both leadership and wisdom is as old as human civilization itself. Leadership has been studied in various ways from different perspectives and in diverse contexts (because it has a significant impact on the success/failure of any organization). On its turn, the subject of wisdom has become a broader interdisciplinary matter. The aims of the paper are to define the concepts of leadership and wisdom, and to present their relationship. The research methodology is based on a quantitative method. The paper shows that leadership and wisdom are complex and multifaceted concepts, and require attention from both a theoretical and practical point of view. Also, it illustrates the relationship between the two concepts by taking into account their common elements.

**Keywords:** leadership, wisdom, intelligence, knowledge

**JEL Classification:** M1, M19

## 1. Introduction

The history of both leadership and wisdom is as old as human civilization itself. Since its emergence in the 1800s (Stogdill, 1974), leadership has been studied in various ways (e.g., qualitative methods, quantitative methods) from different perspectives (e.g., psychology, sociology) and in diverse contexts (e.g., war, business) because it has a significant impact on the success/failure of any organization. In other words, leadership is seen as “the key to organizational effectiveness” (Hogan and Kaiser, 2005, p.169). “One of the world’s oldest preoccupations” (Bass, 1990, p.3), leadership has gained attention of both researchers and practitioners all over the world as it is not only a science and an art but also a practice (Palus, 2005; Carroll, et al., 2008). As demands for highly effective leadership are often heard at all levels in any domain, people have tried to find its key characteristics and relationships with other concepts.

More than 2,000 years ago, the Chinese philosopher Confucius advised leaders to seek wisdom (Rein, 2009; Adler and Delbecq, 2018). As a valuable virtue and a state of idealized being, wisdom has been appreciated, respected and studied throughout time by all civilizations (Staudinger and Glück, 2011). This is why the 1970s witnessed the emergence of the empirical research in wisdom while its pace accelerated in the last two decades (Jeste and Lee, 2019).

The aims of the paper are to define the concepts of leadership and wisdom, and to present their relationship. The paper is structured as follows: the next section reviews the literature. The third section illustrates the research methodology. The fourth

section displays the results. Paper ends with conclusions.

## 2. Literature review

Leadership and wisdom represent two highly debated concepts in the literature. Defining leadership is a hard attempt as there are so many conceptualizations of the term from various domains such as management, organizational behaviour, sociology or psychology. In this respect, the psychological perspective regards the core of leadership to be “a social influence process where leaders use interpersonal behaviors to motivate followers to commit and give their best effort to contribute to group goals” whereas the business panorama puts accent on “the leadership of functions such as strategy, structure, staffing, and work system” (Kaiser, et al., 2012, p.120).

Leadership continues to constitute a challenging, yet rather elusive construct (Yuan, 2013). Most organizations theorists, especially those who are considered as the founders of this field, “regarded the concept of leadership as worthy of intellectual inquiry” (Nohria and Khurana, p.7). Despite the lack of an agreement on its definition leadership is:

- „the ability to get participants in an organization to focus their attention on the problems that the leader considers significant” (Cyert, 1990, p.29).
- „an interaction between two or more members of a group that often involves structuring or restructuring of the situation and the perceptions and expectations of the members” (Bass, 1990, p.19-20).
- “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a

common goal" (Northouse, 2016, p.6).

- "the process of interactive influence that occurs when, in a given context, some people accept someone as their leader to achieve common goals" (Silva, 2016, p.3).

Thus, leadership represents a complex, evolving and context-based concept.

The past few decades have witnessed the expansion of the ancient and provocative topic of wisdom from philosophy and theology to other domains such as psychology and management. In other words, the subject of wisdom has become a broader interdisciplinary matter. Several theories and definitions

of wisdom have emerged and been developed all over the world. Western philosophy treats wisdom as "an analytic theory of expert knowledge, judgment, and advice about difficult and uncertain matters of life" whereas Asian philosophy treats it as "instantiated by wise persons or their products" (Baltes and Kunzmann, 2004, p.290). From a psychological point of view, two main approaches about wisdom have been identified in the literature: the pragmatic approach and the epistemic approach (Table no. 1).

Table no. 1. Psychological approaches regarding the concept of wisdom

	The pragmatic approach	The epistemic approach
Theories	The Berlin wisdom paradigm, the balance theory	Theory on the midway between certainty and doubt, the epistemic theory, the theory of reflective judgment
Focus	on knowledge about the pragmatics of life in service of the self and the common good	on an attitude toward knowledge
Features	- is characterized by achievement and control - is characterized by a failure to achieve and the absence of control	- emphasizes on the know-how of living in an ethical perspective - highlights the limitations of human endeavors

Source: Brugman, 2006

There is no universal definition of the concept of wisdom in the literature. Although there is no consensus on the significance of wisdom, it has been defined as:

- "...the application of successful intelligence and creativity as mediated by values towards the achievement of a common good through a balance among (a) intra-personal, (b) interpersonal, and (c) extra-personal interests, over (a) short and (b) long terms, in

order to achieve a balance among (a) adaptation of existing environments" (Sternberg, 2003, p. 152).

- "a midway between certainty and doubt respectively as expertise in uncertainty" (Brugman, 2006, p.446).

- "the ability to make proper judgments based on good sense and moral values, the possession of insight or wealth of knowledge, the reflective ability to discern inner

qualities and relations, and the emotional-spiritual strength needed to deal with life's uncertainties or to show compassion to others" (Karelitz, et al., 2010, p.838).

- „a higher stage of human development, to be achieved after being exposed to our ability to reflect upon a number of life experiences and to turn pain, suffering and discomfort into valuable lessons about the sense of life" (Sánchez-Escobedo, et al., 2014, p.230).

A multifaceted and dynamic concept, wisdom "involves the use of certain types of pragmatic reasoning to navigate important challenges in social life" (Grossmann, et al., 2012, p.1059). It is said that "some basic characteristics of wisdom are; having cognitive capacity, having synthesis capacity, craving for knowledge and learning, having a long-term point of view, understanding the limitations of knowing and accepting uncertainty which requires humility and is inherently incomplete, knowing the social character of life and interconnectedness of man" (Atan, 2014, p.166). In spite of the fact that there is no consensus in the academic world about what wisdom means, the concept is related to terms such as knowledge, intelligence, reasoning, deeper understanding of the world and life experience.

### 3. Research methodology

In order to reach the aims of the paper the authors used a quantitative method. The quantitative method deals with measurable data and is based on gathering, processing and summarizing information from various secondary sources of data. In this respect, the authors identified and collected information from various sources such as books and academic journals published in renowned publishing houses (e.g., John Wiley & Sons,

SAGE) and electronic databases (e.g., LWW Journals, Wiley Online Library). Thereafter, the authors analysed and synthesised the information, and designed the paper. The literature review was carried on at the Central University Library Carol I of Bucharest and at the British Council Bucharest.

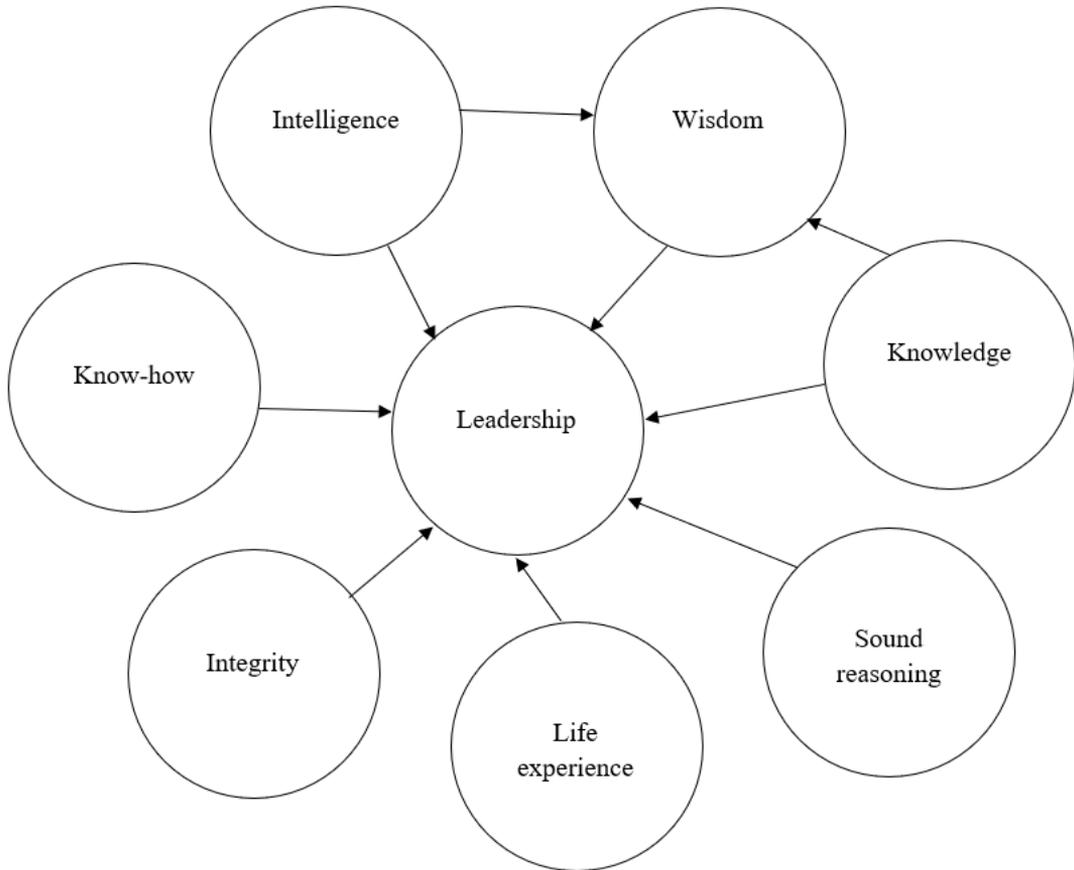
### 4. Results and discussion

Starting from the literature review the authors argue that there is a relationship between the above mentioned concepts: leadership and wisdom. Linking leadership to wisdom has represented a challenging and interesting endeavour. In this respect, there are at least two arguments as follows:

- First, both concepts have matured during the time. The emergence and the development of the leadership concept in the literature has gradually expanded from one domain to another. Moreover, it has become by itself a science, a discipline and a practice. Similarly, the same happened with the wisdom concept.

- Second, the leadership process requires some specific elements. Consequently, a leader should possess particular traits such as intelligence, action-oriented judgment, honesty, sound reasoning, commitment and integrity (Marinescu, et al., 2011; Toma and Marinescu, 2013; Toma, et al., 2016; Toma, et al., 2019). Thus, leadership and wisdom involve several common characteristics (Figure no. 1). Moreover, efficacy leadership implies wisdom as "the combination of know how (techne), episteme (science) and logos (brings circumspection) is still not enough to equip a leader. Leadership calls for techne and phronesis, the practical wisdom that can make a decision in a face of all that is not yet known..." (Smythe and Norton, 2011, p.2).

Figure no. 1. The relationship between the concepts of leadership and wisdom



Source: Authors' contribution

Therefore, there is a clear connection between leadership and wisdom as they share several common elements such as intelligence and knowledge.

### Conclusions

Last decades have witnessed the expansion of the literature related to the concepts of leadership and wisdom. During the time, these terms have been studied from different perspectives and in diverse contexts.

The paper shows that leadership and wisdom are complex and multifaceted concepts, and require attention from both a theoretical and practical point of view. Also, it illustrates the relationship between the two concepts by taking into account their common elements. Further researches may identify other common elements and deepen the analysis of their relationship.

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