Leadership, Information, Knowledge and Wisdom in the Digital Age

**Presented to MCNet Coaches
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I have been reading Henry Kissinger's book World Order (again) over the summer and he had a few thoughts on information, knowledge, and wisdom that I have taken and added my own thoughts. I thought you might find this interesting as a leader of others/organizations in these days.

In our contemporary world, human consciousness is shaped through the filter of media technology that creates a filter that is rather unprecedented. Most of our human interactions are now in the realm of the virtual world through our devices. What is the impact on gaining knowledge and ultimately wisdom?

Granted these are somewhat philosophical questions in nature, but they have very real practical applications for us as leaders within the organizations that we lead. While Kissinger is looking at nations and the arc of human history in culture, we as leaders of organizations have a more modest task. With the great influx of information at everyone's finger tips how do we help our organizations and members gain knowledge and wisdom? As we will see, this requires putting the knowledge in context and giving it perspective.

Analysis is required, which takes into account the history and culture of the organization. As we have attempted to point out in the *Coaching Guide*, to know the culture and be able to change it requires understanding the history of a group and the origin of its values. Only then is it possible to bring about future change that will be attainable and sustainable. This requires more than just getting information but applying wisdom.

This also requires character and courage for the choices have both positive and negative outcomes that must be weighed. The leader often walks a lonely road in bringing about that change (as most organizations and members feel change is a net negative not positive).

Back to the internet, virtual media, and information. The focus of the internet is on the factual not the conceptual; or stated another way, it presents values that are attained merely by consensus (the majority) rather than by introspection and critical thinking based on context and perspective. As all "information" is available at the click of a button, there is little motivation to understand historical context or the critical analysis of the ideas presented. Walking the inevitable lonely path of a leader may not seem that necessary in a world where everyone is seeking immediate affirmation by those who agree with them.

There is little time for analysis in a world which demands an immediate response to every tweet, post, or blog. In the internet age, the danger we face is that many believe that if we just get all the "information" then people (leaders) will make good decisions and truth will prevail. Yet the distinction needs to be made between information, knowledge, and wisdom.

The internet focuses on information and the gaining of facts based on the algorithms of search engines. While so much of our "knowledge" is based on this new way of attaining information, paradoxically, it may actually be hindering the acquisition of real knowledge and ultimately in habiting us from operating in the realm of wisdom.

T.S. Eliot once wrote:
>Where is the Life we have lost in living?
>Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
>Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

The reality is that facts are rarely self-explanatory. Their significance, analysis and interpretation depend upon context and relevance. The task of the leader is to put the facts within context using interpretation in order to arrive at a conclusion.

The danger is to treat all issues as if they are purely factual in nature. And as we know that is just not so. Problems and solutions are not so much needing to be "thought through" with careful analysis but merely

"looked up" on a search engine. However, as leaders of organizations (as well as in most fields in life), to be relevant and helpful, "information" just be placed within the broader context of history, values and experience in order to become actual "knowledge."

In our fast paced world, one where leaders must give opinions and retweets in seconds, not even minutes, let alone days or weeks, there is no time for careful analysis and the gaining of such knowledge. Traditionally, knowledge has been gained through personal interaction, often by those with greater experience. This discussion and exchange of ideas had provided the added dimension to just a factual exchange of information.

So while the computer has made the organization, preserving, and retrieval of information very efficient, the majority of the major decisions facing us as leaders require context and perspective – the gaining of knowledge not just data. The computer, by its very nature, shrinks our perspective. Because information is so accessible and communication instantaneous there is a reduction in understanding what truly is significant. Information becomes something to be consumed rather than interpreted and understood within the proper context.

Kissinger makes the point that the Internet also has the tendency to diminish historical memory. The phenomena has been described in that people forget items they think will be available externally and remember items they think will not be available. Since all items are available at the click of a keystroke, we are conditioned to make no effort to remember them.

"Information at one's fingertips encourages the mindset of a researcher, but may diminish the mindset of a leader." For example, in the age of printing did people see the same world as their medieval forefathers? In our computer age is our view of our world also being changed?

Western history and psychology has traditionally treated truth as independent of personality and even prior experience of the observer. It was considered knowable and constant. Today it is clear that truth has become relevant. The underlying design of most websites is to encourage the user to consume more content as this drives advertising and the economic viability of the Internet.

Based on the personalization of market choices, search engines can provide different answers (list of websites) for the same question. It is based upon what news will best suit you. The concept of truth has become relativized and individualized; truth is no longer universal in character. While all this information (upon which "their" truth is based) is presented as free, it is generated by those exploiting and shaping that information to them by the data the consumer has provided to the provider of this information.

As leaders we must be aware of how the "sausages are made" and what is really going on so that we do not fall into the same trap of assuming that because we have the data we therefore have understanding or wisdom on the subject. These are two different things completely. Truth and wisdom only comes from analysis, interpretation and perspective, not only attaining vast sums of data points. Only then can we as leaders make informed decisions based on values and wisdom, not polling a consensus of what everyone else thinks on the matter.

It seems there are few leaders who are willing to engage in this process. This may be in part be due to the times we live in where to be a leader demands more courage and character. If we feel as a leader we must always be "connected" and our opinions must be immediate, it will inhibit the development of a strength in leaders who are willing to take lonely decisions.

Information, knowledge, wisdom. Leadership requires moving beyond the digital pressures of our age and beyond just gaining facts, but being able to interpret this information based on unchanging truth, which results in wise decisions. This is the type of leaders we have been called to be. It is this type of leadership that takes character and courage. The type of leadership that those we serve need in these days.